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MARK

ILLUSTRATION BY FRED PEGRAM

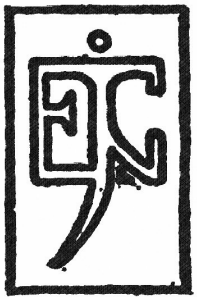
MARK

BY

FRANCES NEWBOLD NOYES

"Mais que diable allait-il faire—qu'allait-il faire dans cette galère?"

CYRANO DE BERGERAC



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FRANCES NEWBOLD NOYES

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TO MY PLAYMATE

NEWBOLD

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I

Mark

THE CURTAIN RISES

"HE'S enchanting," said Lady Mordaunt expressively, "enchanting! I can't bear having him out of my sight! He shall dine with us to-night! Let me see—there will be you, Isabel, and Arthur, and the Cortie, and Jacqueline Campbell, and Leonard and Elizabeth, and Gordon Markham Spencer, child of Nature and future Marquis of Lytton. It will be a beautiful party!"

"It will be a ridiculous party," said Isabel Gordon, smiling down from her slender height. "As for your Spencer man, he is quite, quite mad, my poor Gertrude! I talked to him for five minutes, and I still feel mildly insane. He's infectious."

"He's enchanting," repeated Lady Mordaunt defiantly, "and I'm going to ask him now. Mr. Spencer!"

The tall figure looking down over the terrace turned swiftly, and the two women caught their breath at sight of him. He was extraordinary enough to make any woman catch her breath. Put Praxiteles' Hermes into the most unconventional of white flannels, knot a scarlet tie about his partly bared throat, crop his curls so close that only the strong ripple in the burnished gold betrays their erstwhile existence, flash through the still marble a current of such joyous vitality, such life and color, as was the birthright of the world's childhood before the children of gods and men sacrificed it to Mammon,—such was Gordon Markham Spencer, he whom Gertrude Mordaunt called enchanting and Isabel Gordon termed mad. Then he was on them with such an eager rush that Isabel caught herself searching for the wings at his heels.

"You wanted me?" he demanded.

"I wanted you badly," nodded Lady Mordaunt. "Will you dine with us to-night at eight, Mr. Spencer?"

"How good of you!" cried Gordon Markham Spencer gratefully. "But I believe that I'd rather not."

"You believe!" echoed Lady Mordaunt blankly, putting down her teacup with great care. "Oh, I see—another engagement."

"Oh, no," he replied, shaking his head with that radiant smile that hurt because of its sheer beauty. "It's nothing so imposing. But I'm in the middle of the most thrilling book, Lady Mordaunt! It almost broke my heart to come this afternoon."

"Then," asked Lady Mordaunt mechanically, lifting the cup to her lips, "then why did you come?"

"Cynthia cried," he exclaimed. "She's my cousin, you know, and she cried dreadfully, and said that people would take me for a barbarian if I never

went anywhere. I hated to see her cry; so I came." And he added reminiscently, "I hated to come, too."

Lady Mordaunt shook herself slightly. "Mr. Spencer, if I cried too, dreadfully, would you come?"

"Why, I suppose so," he said simply. "But I hope that you won't. Because I can't tell you how much interested I am in that book."

"Very well, then, I won't. What is the wonderful book? I must read it."

"It's called 'Ivanhoe,' and it's by a man named Scott. Have you read it?"

"'Ivanhoe'!" broke in Isabel exultantly. "Oh, kind saints—'Ivanhoe'!"

He flashed on her, radiant, "You've read it? That's wonderful! And you love it, of course?"

"I have a vague recollection," replied Isabel, lazy mockery in every syllable, "that I had a misguided affection for it at one time, when my mind was as abbreviated as my frocks."

The future Marquis of Lytton con-

templated her gravely. "I think that I should have liked you better then," he informed her serenely, and turned back to Lady Mordaunt. "Please, who is that extraordinarily attractive girl sitting down there quite alone, under the big tree, over there?"

"The one in white? Oh, that's the little American, Priscilla Hampden. The only commonplace thing about her is her American millions: everything else is quite unusual. In the first place, she's from Boston, and that is a blessed relief from New York and Chicago. And then—oh, well, you'll have to meet her to appreciate what I mean. Some day I'll introduce you."

"Why," demanded Isabel, a small, stifled yawn lurking behind her amusement, "why be introduced? Why not just go up to her, Mr. Spencer, and say that you consider her extraordinarily attractive?"

"Why not?" cried Mark. "Oh, you are forgiven your sins, Mrs. Gordon—

that's a glorious idea! May I go now, Lady Mordaunt, and are my sins forgiven too? Thank you for being so good." And he was gone.

"Do you think he will?" demanded Lady Mordaunt in scandalized delight. "Oh, he can't—it's absurd!"

Isabel merely bent thoughtful eyes on the tall figure swinging down the terrace and across the green lawn, a figure as strangely incongruous in all that pleasant, worldly company as some young pagan god would have been, and as divinely unconscious. Straight to his goal he strode, and then halted, golden head bent. There was an instant's pause, and then—

"Upon—my—soul!" breathed Lady Mordaunt. "Isabel!"

But that young woman leaned back, smiling inscrutably. "Didn't I tell you," she murmured unfeelingly, "that he was mad?"

II

ENTER PRISCILLA

HAVING reached his destination, Mark lost no time in idle parley. "Do you mind," he asked, with that surprising smile, "if I talk to you? You looked so cool, and pretty, and interesting, and I was rather lonely."

The small young lady in the large chair scrutinized him for a moment with a pair of mysterious blue-green eyes. Then she nodded, sparkling. "I don't mind a bit. But I'm afraid that it will be difficult to live up to your very generous expectations."

"You're surpassing them every minute," he declared, and sat down. "Don't let's talk for a minute, because I want to look at you. I can't do that properly when I talk."

Whereupon he proceeded to inspect her with the astounding intensity that he brought to bear on all things. He

saw a slight figure, exquisitely garmented in white, and a pale, sweet little face. He saw braids of shining dark hair bound round the shapely small head, heavy-lashed shimmering eyes, a very straight little nose, and a thin-lipped scarlet mouth that was always drooping, only to be valorously quirked up at the corners—a very well trained mouth, in spite of its rebellious proclivities! He saw a pair of slim hands, velvety white and restless, and a little, smooth, round neck like a child's—there was a good deal of the child about her. She had a look of sophisticated unworldliness, such as Eve must have worn after she had partaken of the apple. And there was a demure gayety, a—

"Well?" broke in the object of his scrutiny.

"Oh, very well!" he rejoined happily. "And now we can talk beautifully. I am Gordon Markham Spencer, and you are Priscilla Hampden. I like you so

much that I shall call you Priscilla at once, and you must call me Mark whether you like me or not."

"Agreed!" cried Priscilla gleefully. "Oh, what a beautiful game! When did you decide all this—Mark?"

"All what?"

"Oh, all this—this pose, you know."

"Priscilla, I might just as well tell you now that I'm dreadfully stupid about a great many things. I'm afraid you will have to tell me what 'pose' means."

"Why, it means not being natural, trying to be like someone else, you know."

"Oh, of course—pretending. Well, I do pretend a good deal; but it's for Cynthia, my cousin. She cries such a lot if I don't, poor child!"

"How do you pretend?" asked Priscilla, with absorbed interest.

"Well, I pretend that I don't think that all this kind of thing," with an expressive wave of his hand, "is idiotic.

And I do think that it is perfectly idiotic. It seems to me that everyone in England is pretending all the time. But it worries Cynthia dreadfully when I talk like that; so I don't do it any more. I pretend that I've gotten over it. Anyone who didn't know me would believe that I was just like all these other people."

"Oh," queried Priscilla, in dubious amusement, "would he?"

"Why, of course. The clothes are a little different; but outside of that—oh, you can't imagine how beautifully conventional I am, to please Cynthia. 'Conventional,' I've discovered, means all the things that I ought to be and am not. So it's the fine art of pretending, Priscilla, at which I am becoming a past master." He looked so radiantly triumphant that Priscilla contented herself with laughing.

"Do you always speak to strange young ladies?" she asked finally.

"Of course not! I don't want to

speak to them. I'm afraid of young ladies, Priscilla."

"Afraid—you? Why?"

"They—cry," he explained vaguely, reminiscent of Cousin Cynthia, "or else they're so agitated. What on earth do you suppose I say that could agitate them?"

"What indeed?" mocked Priscilla. "From my cursory acquaintance with the maidens of England, I shudder to think of the havoc that you have wrought. Agitated! Oh, my poor friend!"

"I can't understand it a bit," said Mark thoughtfully. "Do I do such strange things?"

"Perhaps," said Priscilla, "it's the rest of us who are strange."

"I suppose that's it," he agreed simply. "People are awfully queer, it seems to me. And it's so tiring to pretend!" He sat staring into space, hands clasped loosely about his knees, and Priscilla studied him covertly.

In that vivid, mobile face his eyes looked strangely still, two dark, clear sentinels of his soul, quiet, unfathomable, serene, such eyes as she had seen once in a little child and once in an old sailor; but in that vital, beautiful young face they seemed strangely incongruous. They were as old as the world, and as young as an April morning. And, as she looked, they turned to her and the strangeness vanished. They were still a little remote, but very friendly.

"Don't let's pretend, Priscilla!" he cried gayly. "Let's form a society of two,—a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Nature,—I think that's rather nice,—or the Society for the Protection and Preservation of Children of Nature. Do you like that better?"

"I'm afraid that it would have to be a society of one," regretted Priscilla. "I'm a pampered product of an effete though youthful civilization, and consequently hopelessly ineligible. But I

didn't think you could be a child of Nature if you knew it."

"You couldn't help knowing it, if it was borne in on you a dozen times a day. And 'barbarian'! Oh, the crushing inflection with which that is leveled at my defenseless head, Priscilla!" He laughed blithely up at her for sympathy. "But, on my honor, I can't see what I do that is strange. I do just what seems right to me, and say what I think. Is that so wrong?"

"Oh, divinely, hopelessly wrong!" laughed Priscilla. "Please, did you grow in England?"

"Please, I didn't. I grew in Australia, and I've been in England for only about two weeks. Until about fifteen minutes ago I quite hated it; but now I'm beginning to see the error of my ways. I think that I like England, Priscilla."

"England is honored!" laughed the girl. "I think—that I'd like to hear about you, if it isn't impertinent. As

the hero says to the heroine in the dime novel, 'Say on—you interest me strangely.'"

"What's a dime novel? Never mind: if you once start explaining things, we shall never get on. And you interest me, too; though that's not a bit strange. You're the most attractive person that I've ever met out of a book, by far! Before I came here I was quite mad about Rebecca. Do you know Rebecca?"

"Rebecca?"

"In the most gorgeous book called 'Ivanhoe.' Have you read it?"

Priscilla nodded helplessly. "You mean the Jewess, don't you?"

"Of course. I've always liked Jews enormously, haven't you? I mean in books: I've never really known any. But they're so poetic and everything, you know, and then they've had such wretched luck! And I was really quite mad about Rebecca, at first; but now I'm beginning to think that I like her

better between two covers. She'd be rather horrid to talk to, wouldn't she?"

"I don't think that one would call her exactly 'chatty,'" agreed Priscilla gravely.

"No, that's just it. She's too large and noble and dignified. I'm afraid that we'd be unsympathetic: she's not like you!"

"How about Rowena?"

"Oh, Rowena!" cried Mark scornfully. "Rowena is a stick! Not that she isn't a fine woman," he added hastily; "but she's such a bore! And she's big, too. I don't like big people,—women, anyway,—not any more. It's the men that I like in 'Ivanhoe,' Priscilla—they were such splendid chaps! To tell you the truth," he added disconsolately, "I don't get on very well with the men here. It's queer, isn't it?"

He looked so much like a hurt child that Priscilla frowned a little. Ten minutes ago she had thought that he was

some young god come back to earth, and now— She shook herself slightly: in a few minutes she would wake up.

"Didn't you know any men in Australia?" she demanded suspiciously.

"None except my father. The servants were all Chinese, and I never saw anything of the farmhands. My father didn't want me to."

"What was he like, your father?" asked Priscilla, her voice softened. "Do you mind telling me?"

"Mind? Good Heavens, no! But—I can't. There never was anyone just like him, you see; so describing wouldn't do much good. Only—have you ever read about Arthur?"

"Do you mean King Arthur?"

"Yes, Arthur of Camelot. I think that my father must have been like him; only more human, you know. We always called him Sire, because Felicity thought so, too. Perhaps it was Lancelot, only finer. That was the first book I ever read, and then the Iliad and the

Odyssey. I—I'm afraid that I like them better than the Bible, Priscilla."

Priscilla stirred a little, with a ripple of sympathetic laughter. "Breathe it low in England," she admonished.

"I do breathe it low now," laughed this shameless one ruefully. "Cynthia and Uncle Hal nearly died when I told them—really they did! It was simply awful. Uncle Hal's a Bishop, you know."

"Heavenly powers!" ejaculated Priscilla piously.

"I didn't know," explained Mark,—"about the Bible, I mean. I thought it was just like any other book, except that I liked it better because there were some bully fights in it, and parts of it just sing. And David was a corker! But I don't think that the men were such true gentlemen as Arthur's knights, or as good fighters as Achilles. And some of them weren't honorable, and none of them were chivalrous,—in the Old Testament, I mean: the New Testa-

ment's different. I'm awfully keen about Saint Paul."

"Oh!" gasped Priscilla a trifle hysterically. "The poor Bishop—my heart goes out to him!"

Mark propped his head on his fists, clear-eyed and a little stern. "I'm not very fond of Uncle Hal," he told her. "You see, he says that my mother wasn't a good woman."

"Wasn't——"

"But I think that that's rather absurd, because the Bible says that the wicked are always unhappy, and my mother was—why, she just was Happiness! Even her name was Felicity. I never see sunshine, or flowers, or hear birds sing or children laugh, without thinking of her, Priscilla. She used to sing all day long, and she never walked: she ran. The last thing that I used to hear when I went to bed was Felicity laughing, and when I woke up in the morning she was always singing, singing! Nobody is happy like that in Eng-

land, except the children. And they say that they're noisy—noisy, when they're laughing. No, I don't think that I'll ever understand England."

"Why did your uncle say she wasn't good?" asked Priscilla softly.

"Well, you see, she was married when Sire met her, and her husband was just a fiend, and ages older than she was. And of course she loved Sire—anyone would! She stood it just as long as she could, and then she went to Sire and asked him to take her away because she couldn't bear it any longer. So he took her to Australia where he had a farm, and she lived in the overseer's cottage with her old nurse. Sire said that he could be his own overseer, and he was. It had roses all over it, that cottage, and a dear little garden, just like the ones in the stories, Priscilla. Felicity said she started in being happy then—and she never had time to stop! Every morning Sire used to ride over on a big black horse—early, early!—and throw pebbles

at her window to wake her up. And she'd come down to him, and they'd go and get strawberries for breakfast, and fill all the bowls with flowers, and play till it was time for luncheon. They always used to play, Priscilla—you'd think it was silly, if it weren't so beautiful. Then it would be time for luncheon, and they'd have it outside, sitting on the grass, just big bowls of milk and bread and cheese,—everything but kisses, Felicity said. I don't see how he could help kissing her, my little lovely mother! Only, when he went away, Felicity would pick him the very loveliest rose that grew over the cottage, and kiss it deep in its heart; and he would kiss it, too. Afterward—when they'd gone, you know—I found a little carved chest in his room, and when I opened it, it was full of queer little hard brown things—dead roses, Priscilla. They'd been there for all those years, the poor little ugly things, and they'd been so sweet and beautiful,—lovely and velvety, crimson

and pink and golden,—and now they were dead! I hadn't cried when Felicity went away, nor when Sire did, either; but I cried then—it's horrible to cry."

Priscilla's hands flew out to him impulsively: only to be withdrawn and firmly folded in her lap. "Did she always live in the little cottage?" she asked.

"Oh, no! After awhile the devil in England died, and Sire and Felicity were married, and I was born. There were three of us to play then, and the cottage was too little; so we went to live in the farmhouse. We lived there for nineteen years—till Felicity went away."

"How did she—go away?" whispered the girl.

"I think she was too happy," said Mark simply. "The doctors say that it was heart trouble; but I think that she was just too happy. You can't be so glad as that, and live. She had gone down into the garden to pick flowers one day, and Sire called to her from the

house, and she started to run to him, the way she always did, you know,—and then she tripped—and fell. And when we got there she had gone away—died, you call it."

"How terrible!" choked Priscilla. "Oh, Mark, how terrible!"

"It wasn't so terrible as it was strange," said Mark. "It was as if, all of a sudden, the world was empty. Just a minute before she had been there, singing and laughing—and then all the singing had gone away and all the laughter stopped. It was quite empty."

"What happened to your father?" asked Priscilla, and her face twisted with pity at the thought.

"He shot himself," said Mark quietly.

"No!" flamed the girl. "No! How could he be so cruel?"

"Oh, he asked me first, you see. He stood it for a long time; but I could see. I'd come on him sometimes with his head bent a little, as though he were listening—and I knew that he was listening to

hear Felicity laugh. One night—it was awfully late; but I couldn't go to sleep, because I could hear him below in the garden—he came to my door and knocked. He said, 'Are you awake, Galahad?' He and Felicity used to call me Galahad—just for a joke, you know: Galahad was such a wonder! And I said 'Yes.' He said, 'May I come in?' And I said, 'Why, of course.' So he came in, and stood looking at me with a queer little smile.

"After awhile he said, 'Mark, what would you do if I went away?' I didn't understand at first: I think I was a little sleepy. So I just echoed 'Away?' And Sire said very quietly, 'I mean to Felicity, Mark.' Then I knew! I said, 'Wait a minute—let me think.' I thought of Felicity, with the fine gold harp they'd given her, who couldn't sing because Sire wasn't there—Felicity, dumb amid all the choiring cherubim and seraphim—Felicity, who would be frightened in Heaven without Sire. So

I said, 'I think you'd better go, because Felicity will be lonely.' And he took a long breath and said, 'Thank you.' Then he went to the door; but when he had his hand on the knob he turned and came back. 'Are you sure you will be all right?' he asked. I said, 'Rather! You mustn't worry about me, you know.' He put both hands on my shoulders and looked at me—oh, for ages. I could hear our hearts beating. Then he said, 'Felicity—she'll be so proud of you when I tell her! Good-night, my Galahad! Sleep sweet!' And—he kissed me. He never had before. He went out and shut the door quite quietly, and then I could hear the outer door close, and his feet going down the path.

"Then I was afraid—I was awfully afraid. I went over and knelt by the window and watched the stars go out, one by one,—little bright candles, snuffed out by Someone's hand. There were only three left—only two—the last star had gone. The sky was that queer

green that it gets sometimes in the early morning, and after awhile it began to get a little saffron round the edges; and then, quite suddenly, almost as though it had jumped at me, the sun came up. The sun, Priscilla! I laughed out loud for sheer relief. 'Now he'll come back,' I thought. 'It's morning; so he'll come back. I'll tell him that I can't bear it just yet; that Felicity won't mind waiting a little; that——'

"And then I heard a shot, far off in the garden, and another shot, and then it was all quite still again, and I knew that he had found Felicity. A clock struck somewhere five times, and I put on my clothes and went down into the garden. The birds were beginning to sing, and the roses were all covered with dew. They were red, like blood; but they smelled so sweet, so sweet——"

"Don't!" cried Priscilla, and she threw out her hands with a passionate little gesture of protest. "To die with the sun on the roses—oh, horrible!"

"What's a bullet or two through the heart, if it's broken?" said Mark. "I didn't mind the red roses: it was the dead ones——" He broke off with a little shiver, his eyes darkening. Then, with a sudden bound, he was on his feet, more radiant and more carefree than that Hermes whom he resembled. "Let's laugh!" he cried recklessly. "Laugh, Priscilla! Ye gods, what a day! Did I frighten you? Don't mind so much—though I love you for minding."

Priscilla sprang sharply to her feet. "I know that you're not real, you incredible person," she mocked serenely, the frightened child quite gone, and a very well poised and slightly sardonic young woman in her place. "But I can't have even a phantom of thin air informing me that he loves me, in that casual way. Thank you, Mr.—Spencer, wasn't it?—for a highly diverting dream. Aren't you going to dissolve?"

"Great Heavens!" cried the phantom.

"There's Cynthia! I utterly forgot her. I must run. When shall I see you again, Priscilla? Quick!"

"I'm going to Lady Mordaunt's musicale to-morrow night," said Priscilla mechanically, and could have bitten out her tongue.

"I'll be there!" cried Mark exultantly. "I'll ask myself. To-morrow—it's a century! I shall miss you horribly." He bent suddenly over the small hands; then, before she could catch her breath, he was off, clearing the lawn with great, easy strides. Priscilla closed her eyes, and then opened them again, cautiously. He was still there, swinging along beside Cousin Cynthia, a brown-haired girl in blue muslin.

"He isn't real," she asserted stubbornly. "In a minute I'll wake up. He couldn't be real!" But she cast a reminiscent glance at the slim little hands, only to look away again, quickly.

III

ENTER CÆSAR

"Mrs. Morris—Miss Hampden—Mr. and Mrs. Gordon!" announced the gorgeous individual in scarlet and gold in stentorian tones.

"How charmingly quaint!" murmured Lady Mordaunt. "Dear Mrs. Morris, you must let us always keep your little daughter: we should miss her pretty frocks and her prettier manners too badly. Arthur, you wretch, why didn't you come to dinner? I never forgive anyone who refuses to fill in—never! Isabel, for the love of Heaven, take off those earrings! You are too hideous in them—positively too hideous! I can't think what Arthur's about, letting you disfigure yourself in that manner. You're plain enough already, goodness knows!"

The graceful, wide-eyed young woman in gray and scarlet simply shook the

offending articles at her, with a derisive little laugh. "Fancy Arthur's caring!" she said in her soft, pretty voice. "You can't be at all chic nowadays without being hideous, anyway, Cousin Gertrude. For once Fashion favors me!"

"Go away," commanded Lady Mordaunt shrilly. "Go away at once! You always irritate me, and you know it! I can't abide pertness!"

"Mrs. Platt-Fortescue—Miss Platt-Fortescue—Miss Alicia Platt-Fortescue—Captain Denby!" intoned the scarlet and gold one.

Priscilla watched them from her vantage ground with great, incurious eyes. Mrs. Platt-Fortescue seemed bursting with a maternal pride that her offspring did not justify, and Captain Denby—Priscilla's lips curved in the most charming of smiles. Captain Denby looked delightfully imbecile and proud of it. She sank back in her chair with a tiny sigh of satisfaction. She was much pleased with herself to-night. The short-

waisted, full gauze frock, guiltless of any trimming save the knot of velvety camellias, the tiny white satin sandals, the camellia tucked demurely over one ear in the glossy braids,—all became her admirably. She clasped her two ringless and gloveless small hands over the enormous bunch of camellias in her lap, and smiled again. She was looking incredibly young, incredibly demure, incredibly unsophisticated, and she was feeling incredibly wicked.

"Why are you smiling like that, Priscilla?" demanded Mrs. Morris sharply.

"I was smiling because I thought I looked so pretty," explained Priscilla candidly. It was rather fun telling the truth when you once got started.

Mrs. Morris stared at her in irritated amazement. "Priscilla, you are simply impossible! How any well brought up young girl can think such things, much less say them, is absolutely beyond me!"

"It is rather absurd of me, isn't it?" acquiesced Priscilla cheerfully. "Moth-

er, aren't you glad that I don't look like Miss Alicia Platt-Fortescue,—the one in magenta satin and forget-me-nots, with auburn hair? Aren't you?"

"I am happy to say that, with me for your mother, it would be impossible for you to resemble that unfortunate young person."

"You never can tell. She doesn't look a bit like that fat little Mrs. Platt-Fortescue, not a bit more than I look like you."

Mrs. Morris searched her daughter's upturned countenance for any sign of malice; but not a ripple agitated that blandly innocent surface. She rose majestically to her feet.

"I see Lady Duffield beckoning to me," she said. "I promised to give her the schedule that we laid out for our trip through the Riviera last winter. She desires to repeat it. If Lord Harrowfield speaks to you, have the goodness to be more gracious to him than you were Monday night! I do not

think that marked cordiality toward any of the other young men present is necessary or desirable. Are you listening to me, Priscilla?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I will come back to you when the music starts. Remember what I have said."

"Yes, Mother." She remained respectfully standing, a demure little white statue, until the portly figure of Mrs. Morris had wended its stately way through the seats and halfway across the crowded room. Then she sank back into her chair, the valiant mouth drooping ingloriously at the corners.

"Ouf!" she sighed impatiently, with a nervous little twist of her shoulders. She surveyed the gathering sea of faces with the same uncompromising droop.

No burnished head shone high above the others—that radiant comrade of yesterday, then, had been as mythical as his Greek ancestors! There remained now only to forget the fantastic episode as

rapidly as possible. But for that night she would play his game,—the truth, nothing but the truth, the whole—no, she was too much of a novice to attempt to handle the whole truth. She relinquished it with a regretful sigh: otherwise, she considered herself an excellent amateur. Who was that erect, gray-haired man coming across the room with the Duchess of Cleves? What an unusual looking person, with his worn, distinguished face and the imperishable youth laughing gallantly from his magnificent eyes! Why, they were coming toward her!

"Little Miss Hampden, my wicked brother wanted to be presented to you. I give you fair warning, he's dangerous."

"I am not so fortunate," said the man, bowing low. "It has ever been a cherished but unrealized ambition of mine. Alas! a lamb is warriorlike beside me."

Priscilla smiled prettily. "We are

both unlucky, then," she said; "for I was feeling peculiarly adventurous tonight. Couldn't you manage to conceal yourself in wolf's clothing?"

"I can make a decided effort," he assured her. "Marian, you may leave us. If Miss Hampden proves too merciless, I shall flee to you for protection."

"You may confide him to me," returned Priscilla. "He is perfectly safe in my hands, your Grace."

"I am not sure," said the Duchess of Cleves with emphasis, "not at all sure; but, in spite of my uncertainty, I must leave you. Be good children."

Her brother watched her retreating figure with a slightly sardonic smile. "Are you prepared to be a good child, Miss Hampden?"

"To the contrary!" laughed Priscilla. "I am prepared to be a totally depraved enfant terrible. Are you prepared to be a good wolf?"

"Having never assumed that fascinat-

ing but exacting rôle, Modesty lays her hand upon my lips. However, I can safely promise to conceal my wool for one evening. May I sit down?"

"You may. Now growl your best, please. And—oh, would you mind telling me your name, so that we can start even?"

He leaned forward, a sudden glint of amusement in his eyes. "You don't know, really? Oh, no, Modesty herself withdraws at the thought! You are being facetious."

Priscilla shook her sleek little head. "Indeed I'm not: simply truthful. If I were at all discreet or well mannered, I'd smilingly dissemble, and, after five minutes of adroit and artful angling, actually know who you were. But I'm playing a game with myself to-night; so I'll admit that I haven't the most remote suspicion as to your identity. It's an important one, evidently. I should bow my head in shame."

"You are in earnest?"

"'Honest Injun,' as our aristocracy have it. You've worked me up to such a feverish state of excitement now, though, that nothing that you could possibly be would justify it. Unless—you're not Mephistopheles, by any chance?"

"I've been accused of it," admitted the man, with a slight twist of his mobile mouth. "But I'm no such great matter. I'm a poor scrivener, Miss Hampden; but wicked false pride forbids me to continue. It would be a mortal blow if you had not read my scribblings."

"If you're not Felicia Hemans, or Alexander Pope, I probably have. Otherwise, I prefer to join the ranks and regard you as Mephistopheles. You aren't Felicia Hemans, are you?"

The man laughed outright. "Rest in peace—I am not that immortal lady. Just to punish you, I'm going to tell you who I am. You will be horribly sorry that you have treated me so cavalierly.

I am generally known, little Miss Hampden, as Geoffrey Winter."

Priscilla contemplated him for a moment, round-eyed. Then, "I don't believe it!" she said flatly.

"Oh, come! This is a base insult to either myself or my works. Why don't you believe it?"

"Because it isn't true," she affirmed uncompromisingly. "You're just trying to make me jump."

"You are misjudging me cruelly. But I am sufficiently flattered by your obvious familiarity with my works to forgive you. Oh, Harry!"

The slim, brown-haired boy, hurrying by with two cups of punch in his hands, whirled about. "Did you want me?" he asked, and there was a certain deferential eagerness in his manner that made Priscilla move uneasily. *Cher maître* sounded in every note of his charming, immature voice.

"Miss Hampden, may I present one of my young friends, Henry Gilleon?

Harry, will you tell Miss Hampden my name?"

The boy stared uncertainly, a bright flush mounting under his tan. "Your name?" he queried helplessly.

"Exactly. Have you forgotten it?"

"It's—it's Lord Charteris," said young Gilleon, stammering in his eagerness.

Priscilla drew a deep breath of relief.

"So it is," agreed the older man, and at the amused irony in his tone the boy's flush deepened. "And now, if it isn't asking too much, Harry, the other one?"

"I'm frightfully stupid," said Harry Gilleon simply, "but I don't understand. Of course it's some kind of joke—you must think that I'm no end of an idiot. It's Geoffrey Winter, of course. Is that all, Sir?"

"A thousand thanks: quite all. We'll have a cigarette later: I have some things to talk over with you. Run on with your commissions now, Lad."

The boy smiled hesitatingly at Priscilla, bowed precipitately, and strode off,

perplexity in every line of his straight, slight figure.

"Poor Harry—that was rather unkind," smiled Lord Charteris. "Well, Miss Hampden—sackcloth and ashes? I'm looking forward to your penitence."

"I'm not penitent: I'm stunned," replied Priscilla, her face a little whiter than usual.

"My behavior has been atrocious," said Charteris remorsefully; "but, on my honor, if I had the most remote idea that you had ever really heard of my unworthy name, a deaf mute would have been loquacious beside me. My nom de plume is not a byword with débutantes! My demoniac scheme was to revel in your discomfiture at my unenlightened revelation; the rest of my mortifying exhibit was a pure tribute to your supposed histrionic powers. So you really had heard of Geoffrey Winter! Ah, well, I am deservedly punished. I thought that you were doing what is vividly termed 'throwing a bluff.'"

Priscilla raised her head, shaken but undaunted, a gleam of malice in her blue-green eyes. "It is painful for me to confess it, Lord Charteris, but if you are Geoffrey Winter you are undeniably my affinity. I fell irretrievably in love with him at the mature age of ten."

"Fortune favors me," murmured Lord Charteris, and there was a caressing note in his supple voice. "I claim his laurels as my own. What weary years I have spent in looking for you, little affinity, going to and fro on the face of the earth!"

"How nicely you growl," said Priscilla a trifle breathlessly. She felt as might that unfortunate individual who had chained the whirlwind. A chained whirlwind, with you at the other end of the chain, is a force to be reckoned with. She had vague memories of taking her enormous St. Bernard for a walk, and coming to the painful realization that he was taking her for a run.

"'I'll roar you as gently as any sucking dove,'" quoted the man. "What kind gods introduced you to Geoffrey Winter at ten, little affinity? Is that dainty foot of yours shod in a blue stocking?"

"Don't you know the myth concerning Boston?" parried Priscilla. "All feet go shod in blue there. But mine is the palest of blue silks; so take heart."

"I have apparently taken it these many years ago. Will you take mine? Fair exchange!"

"Robbery!" laughed Priscilla breathlessly. "You have made a bad bargain. Geoffrey Winter has mine."

"Render unto Leonard Charteris the things that are Geoffrey Winter's!" said the man. "I claim my just dues. You have sealed your own warrant!"

"The coin that bears the head of Leonard Charteris does not ring as that which bears the head of Geoffrey Winter," replied Priscilla. "I render unto

Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's; but—I give the devil his due."

"Give it him, them! He asks no more, poor devil!"

"He would find it frugal fare," said Priscilla. She was mentally out of breath and badly frightened; but she had a gallant little soul.

"Do you know what my friends call me?" asked that compelling voice. "Shall I have Harry back to tell you?"

"You have proved accurate in your statements. I'll hear you again."

"They call me Cæsar. Render unto Cæsar—sheer folly, isn't it?"

"I see," she laughed maliciously, "*Veni, vidi, vici!*"

"Another cruel thrust—Brutus himself was more kindly. Is Cæsar too ambitious, little affinity?"

"Cæsar is mixing his metaphors. It was not great Julius' head that graced the coin."

"You go clothed in blue from head to foot," smiled the man, and, while the

voice caressed, the mouth mocked, and the eyes applauded, "and I swear that it's vastly becoming."

But Priscilla's eyes were far away. She brought them on him abruptly. "Lord Charteris, do you ever tell the truth?"

"I am obliged to admit that there have been times when I have done so by mistake. But I have repented with such vehemence and fervor that I have invariably been absolved."

"No," said Priscilla critically, "I shouldn't describe you as a flagrantly truthful person."

"You are generous. I find telling the truth like playing with edged tools: it is twice cursed; it curseth him who gives and him who takes."

"I found someone yesterday who told me the truth," confided Priscilla. "And it was rather—nice."

"The truths that people told you would always be—nice," said the man.

"There's a lady over there in a green

frock. She looks a perfectly irresistible cross between a Raphael saint and a Rossetti sinner, and she's smiling at you—she's smiling hard. I think, if you went to her, Lord Charteris, you'd find balm in Gilead for your wounds."

"You are sending me away?"

"The music is going to begin, and my mother is coming to reduce me to my proper state of a good little girl. Mother, may I present Lord Charteris? My mother, Mrs. Morris."

Charteris returned Mrs. Morris's murmur of incredulous delight by a polite bow, and turned to Priscilla. "I am obedient; but I am not beaten," he said, and his voice vibrated. "Cæsar would count you the greatest of his conquests."

"*Ave, Cæsar!*" replied Priscilla softly, and added more softly still, "*Atque vale!*" But he was gone.

"Lord Charteris!" exclaimed Mrs. Morris with a majestic flutter. "*The* Lord Charteris! My dear, how on earth did you happen to meet him?"

"His sister presented him," replied Priscilla abstractedly.

She was thinking hard. Had Cæsar been playing a game? Oh, surely, surely —absurd to think anything else! Either an assumed one, growling nicely to please a little maid in search of adventure, or else an old one. She was inclined to lean toward the latter theory. She was glad that the Duchess had warned her, however, or she might have been a little nervous. He had a most extraordinary way of expressing himself. Every remark he made was startlingly personal, and then, all the time, she had had a horrid feeling that she was talking to someone in a book—or in a dream. Their whole conversation had had the same stilted, keen fashion that she had often scoffed at between covers, and it had had, too, that breathless quality that she had frequently felt in a dream,—an unreasoning apprehension of impending evil. He should not force her into it again—if she ever saw him again! She

would be natural as well as truthful; she would—

"Priscilla," broke in Mrs. Morris's querulous tones, "I don't believe that you have heard one single word I've been saying."

"I haven't," admitted Priscilla frankly.

"Well!" remarked Mrs. Morris with not unpardonable acerbity. "You are the most ungrateful child that a good mother ever had! I asked you twice what you were talking to Lord Charteris about."

"Everything," replied Priscilla vaguely. "History, theology, ethics——" her lips twitched mischievously.

"Priscilla Hampden! And after all the care that I have spent on you! Anything more unprofitable and less ladylike I cannot well imagine. I——"

Thank heavens, there was the music! A few warning chords on the piano, and the cruel buzz ceased—all the harshness of speech ceased. For Isolde, the beautiful Isolde, was dying of love in that

crowded room. How her voice throbbed and pulsed and soared, that great, beating voice of wine and fire and gold, and how it grew suddenly hushed and mysterious, clad in the beauties of snow and running water and silver. On and on —Priscilla felt that if it continued her heart would break, and that if it ceased it would surely break. Her eyes were closed, and her lips were parted a little. Some of the people sitting about her smiled half tenderly, half ironically, she looked so unspeakably young and so intense. Alas! it was stopping—it was stopping—it had stopped!

Priscilla sat quite still, eyes closed, breath suspended, waiting for the wave of applause to break, the mighty surge that must break on the beach of that great song. It came—a pleasant, murmuring patter, as of summer rain! Her eyes flew open and her mouth shut in amazed indignation. How dared they—how *dared* they! Why, it was an insult. Greet it thus! It was—

"I've come," said a voice from behind her, so close that she flung startled eyes over her shoulder. There he stood, smiling his incredible smile, looking more incredible than ever—Gordon Markham Spencer—Mark! Her playmate had come back!

IV

ENTER THE LADY IN GREEN

"I GAVE you up long ago," said Priscilla happily to Mark. "Wasn't asking yourself sufficient?"

"Oh, it wasn't that. Lady Mordaunt was perfectly delighted, and said that she had asked me already with Cynthia and Uncle Hal, but that I must have forgotten. And I said that I had, but that I shouldn't again."

"I want you to know my mother," said Priscilla hurriedly. "Mother, may I present Mr. Spencer?"

Mark flooded Mrs. Morris's petrified figure with his radiant smile. "Oh, I hope that you will like me! Of course I shall be awfully fond of you, because you are Priscilla's mother. Don't you think, Mrs. Hampden——"

"Mrs. Morris," replied that lady icily.

"But I thought that Priscilla——" began Mark in friendly perplexity.

"My daughter bears her father's name."

"Oh," said Mark, with wistful sympathy, "has he—gone away?"

"Sir!" quivered Mrs. Morris, outraged dignity in every line. "Mr. Hampden, with all his failings, was a gentleman. He knew his place."

"I meant, is he dead?" explained Mark gently.

"He is no more," replied Mrs. Morris, and closed her mouth with an audible click.

"I am so sorry! Though, of course," he added, consolingly, "you couldn't have cared very much, or you wouldn't have married again. I do think that that is the most extraordinary idea, marrying again. Do tell me——"

But Priscilla had found her voice. "Do tell me," she begged feverishly, "what made you so late this evening."

"Well, I went to sleep," explained

Mark obediently. "After dinner I went upstairs, and Uncle Hal had given me a book of poems to read. They were called 'Gems from Wordsworth'—and I went to sleep in the middle of one about Peter Bell. They were the most peculiar poems. I suppose he must have been very, very young. I don't think that I ever read such peculiar poems. Have you ever heard of them?"

Priscilla nodded weakly.

"Have you?" pursued the hapless Mark.

Mrs. Morris glared. "If England contained more such refined and sublime geniuses as the great Wordsworth, it would be a happier and safer spot."

Mark looked a trifle crestfallen, and then brightened. "Oh, well, I didn't get very far. The genius probably came later. Besides, I wasn't exactly fair, because I kept comparing him with Swinburne all the time, and, of course, that made him seem ridiculous. But, then, no one could help seeming ridicu-

lous beside Swinburne, except Shakespeare and Browning, could they? I mean in England."

Mrs. Morris closed her eyes and shuddered slightly. "Algernon Swinburne is a blot on civilization," she said distinctly.

Mark welcomed this uncharitable ultimatum with affable interest. "I suppose he is," he agreed cheerfully; "but, then, I don't think much of civilization. I'd call most of my favorites in the Old Testament—David, for instance—blots on civilization, wouldn't you?"

"I refuse to permit such blasphemy in my presence," exploded the sorely tried Mrs. Morris. "Do you hear? I refuse! Priscilla——"

Priscilla flew to the rescue, commanding her voice by a heroic effort. "Look, the music is going to begin," she said hastily to the vile blasphemer, who stood blankly contemplating his outraged victim. "Don't you think that you had better find a chair somewhere and then

come back and take me down to supper? Don't forget!"

"You know I won't forget," said Mark.

The music had really started,—a string quartet, rendering exquisitely and lovingly the quaint severity of Bach. Surely there would be a brief respite, during which she could collect her scattered forces and pacify——

"Priscilla," came the piercing, sibilant voice of Mrs. Morris, music or no music, "who was that—*creature?*"

"His name is Gordon Markham Spencer," replied Priscilla cautiously, and added incautiously, "He's a great friend of mine."

"A great—oh, if I had you at home! That outrageous young infidel a *friend* of yours!"

"Do whisper!" entreated Priscilla frantically. "His uncle is a Bishop, after all."

"A Bishop!" Mingled waves of incredulity and relief chased themselves

across Mrs. Morris's statuesque countenance.

"And he's here with him to-night!" concluded Priscilla dramatically, and, she trusted, veraciously. "So you see it's quite all right, Mother dear. Now do let's wait till the music stops."

The rest of the music proved merely a background for the bright threads of her thoughts, weaving in and out, a charming and intricate design. Cæsar's voice—Mark's smile—they were the gold threads in the pattern. How interesting life was suddenly becoming! She smiled reminiscently,—the uncontrollable, spontaneous smile of childhood, which sometimes still betrayed her. Oh, she did hope that the impassioned and excited tenor voice that had followed hard on the Bach would continue indefinitely to inform the world that "it was all in vain to implore him." She was so comfortable now, and explanations would prove undeniably awkward!

But Nemesis was hot on her heels.

Mrs. Morris's voice was suddenly substituted for that of the tenor. "Now!" she said, with significant brevity.

"His—his uncle is a Bishop," repeated Priscilla guiltily.

"His manner hardly impressed me as clerical," remarked Mrs. Morris grimly. "Is he preparing for the ministry?"

"Oh, no," said Priscilla unsteadily; though she felt that hysterics were the only adequate reply to such a question; "at least, I don't think so."

"Then what career is he intending to pursue?"

Career? Mark—career? The two poles were nearer one to the other than those two. She racked her brain frantically. There was no way out of it. Indubitably she was destined to tell the truth this evening.

"I don't think that he has decided on one yet. You see, it hasn't been long since he came from Australia."

"I suspected as much," retorted Mrs. Morris. "Australia, or Africa, or

Greece, or some other wild, heathen country!"

Priscilla veiled the unquenchable mirth in her eyes. "He isn't exactly wild," she said soothingly: "only a little unsophisticated and—er—frank."

"You must be mad," said the unfeeling lady curtly. "Frank, indeed! May I ask how long you have known him?"

Now for the thunderbolt! Priscilla mentally closed her eyes and swallowed. "Since yesterday," she replied firmly.

Mrs. Morris made an involuntary movement of recoil. "Yesterday?" she repeated mechanically.

"Yesterday afternoon," amplified Priscilla.

"And how did you meet this—person?"

"I—just met him." She gave a vague wave of her hand that was meant to be airy, but failed lamentably. Even now she felt the same sick terror that she used to feel as a small child of her

mother's sheer size. The colossal bulk of it paralyzed her.

"Do not be impertinent. Who presented him to you?"

"He presented himself," said Priscilla sweetly. But she felt cold. The truth was an excellent servant, but a treacherous mistress.

"Reflect before you repeat that. This individual was not introduced to you?"

Priscilla laughed helplessly at the horrid incredulity depicted on her mother's countenance.

"I cannot believe it," said Mrs. Morris. "I simply cannot! A daughter of mine——"

"The music is all over," Mark's voice broke in happily. "I asked Lady Mordaunt, and she said so. And I found a partner for Cynthia. And I'm hungry. So do let's hurry, Priscilla."

Priscilla rose, clutching at her chair. Never in her life had she defied her mother; but if defiance were necessary now she would not shirk. "I'm com-

ing," she said obediently. "Are—are you, Mother?"

"But I want to talk to you," interposed Mark firmly; though he smiled at Mrs. Morris. "I don't want anyone else to hear. Of course, I'd love to get Mrs. Morris anything that she wants to eat. What would you like?"

"Water," murmured Mrs. Morris, "at once!"

"Are you feeling badly?" inquired Mark solicitously. "Oh, I am sorry! It's over there, Priscilla."

Priscilla was already darting toward the open door and freedom, shaking with pent-up laughter.

"What a shame!" Mark was saying penitently. "And do you know, I thought she was a little cross. Priscilla! Are you crying?"

"No," replied Priscilla truthfully, and she dried her eyes. "I don't think that you are real, Mark."

"Aren't you going to take some water to your mother?" demanded Mark.

"Water?" echoed Priscilla vaguely. "Oh, I forgot. On the whole, I don't think that we shall take it. A waiter will be safer."

"What on earth do you mean?" he demanded, wide-eyed. "Safer? You need never again accuse me of being queer, Priscilla!"

Priscilla considered him a minute in silence, her head tilted on one side. "You mustn't think me queerer, but I'm going to ask you the two silliest questions in the world," she informed him, with a brave smile. "And I hate doing it so that I shall probably choke to death. Are—are you rich, Mark?"

"I'm awfully rich," replied Mark gravely. "You see, Felicity had heaps and heaps of money, and Sire wouldn't even touch it. Do you want some of it?"

Priscilla shook her head, with a small, twisted smile. "No, I don't want it," she said gently. "You see, I have lots myself. It's the next one that is really

important." She took a long breath. "Are you of very good family, Mark?"

"I'm being stupid again; but I told you all about my family, didn't I? Have you forgotten? About Uncle Hal's saying that he didn't think that Felicity *was* good?"

Priscilla wasn't pale any longer—she glowed as rosy red as any country lass. "I don't mean that," she explained faintly, "I mean—I mean are you related to any Dukes or Duchesses or Earls—or anything? Oh, how odious it sounds!"

Mark brightened. "Oh, of course," he assured her joyously. "All my relations are like that, except Uncle Hal. I'm pretty nearly a Marquis myself; at least, I shall be when Uncle Rupert dies, and everyone says that he can't live long, poor thing!"

"Are any of them here to-night—your relations?"

"There's Aunt Elizabeth," suggested

Mark hopefully. "She's the Countess of Germaine. Would she do?"

"She'll do beautifully," acquiesced Priscilla with a long sigh of relief. "Go and get Aunt Elizabeth and a glass of water, please, and take them to Mother. I'll wait here. Does she like you?"

"Aunt Elizabeth? Rather! She says that she's simply mad about me!" He stated it with such contented simplicity that Priscilla beamed on him.

"Then she'll go; and do ask her to say all kinds of nice things about you. Mother has met her already, you know; so it's all right. I'll wait right here. Hurry!"

It was a superfluous injunction. In two minutes the Countess of Germaine was captive, and Priscilla watched them vanish together through the open door by which she had so recently and incontinently fled. In two minutes more Mark came swinging back through it alone.

"She's perfectly all right," he assured

Priscilla. "She was looking for us everywhere, and I'm afraid that she was worried; but I explained to her that I had left you only for a minute. And Aunt Elizabeth said some corking things about me, and then your mother smiled at me in the kindest way and said, 'Dear Mr. Spencer, I am sure that you will take good care of my little girl. Go back to her, and please don't worry about me. I shall be quite all right.' Isn't she splendid? And I thought that she was cross."

Priscilla smiled demurely. "Did you? Now let's have supper, please. Do we have to go downstairs?"

"Let's stay here," proposed Mark eagerly. "Everybody is simply screaming downstairs, and I hate to scream. I'll get two plates of the nicest things to eat, and something cold to drink, and we'll pretend that we are shipwrecked on a desert island."

"I didn't know that pâté de foi gras and celery salad and jellied squabs and

iced claret cup flourished on desert islands," remarked Priscilla tentatively.

"You're showing a shocking lack of imagination," he reproved her. "But, if you insist, we'll be wrecked somewhere just off the North Pole where there's plenty of ice, and we'll find a hole where one of those explorer chaps that they are always talking about has buried any amount of delicious and nourishing food to eat on the way back. And we'll eat it all up!"

"All?" demurred Priscilla. "I think that would be greedy. Besides, it's stealing."

"Then we'll eat the delicious half and leave them the nourishing," compromised Mark regretfully but magnanimously. "I think it's perfectly all right to steal, anyway, if you need things and they won't give them to you. You will play, though, won't you, Priscilla?"

"Of course, I'll play. Couldn't you get four plates? I'm starving."

"I'll get four apiece," said Mark, "be-

cause I am, too. What an appetite this clear, sharp air does give one!"

Priscilla shivered appreciatively in the warm, perfumed room—and then they laughed together, irresponsible and joyous as two children.

"Make yourself useful while I'm gone," Mark admonished from the doorway. "The least that you can do is to find a convenient cave, so that we can eat properly and peacefully, and not be discovered by the maddened explorers, when they find that they haven't anything but nourishing things left to eat."

Priscilla waited till he was well out of sight, and fled on tiptoes across the room. A cave! There in the far corner behind the brocade sofa was a shimmer of green palm trees! They might not be strictly appropriate for the suburbs of the North Pole, but they offered a most delectable hiding place where it would take energetic explorers indeed to discover them. The accumulated dignity of twenty years was quite forgotten: she

had left it with the heavy bunch of camellias in the music room, and now she was six years old and "making believe" with the best playmate in the world. A brief and undignified scramble landed her flushed, breathless, and triumphant in the little semicircle inclosed by the palm trees, and their stiff green leaves closed behind her with a defiant rattle.

There was nothing to sit on but the floor, and Priscilla sat on it with extraordinary promptness, and patted her hair into shape with a gay and defiant little laugh. It had been so long—so wickedly long—since she had indulged in the supreme luxury of being silly,—not since her father had died, and the small little girl had suddenly, without an inch added to her smallness, become a big little girl, all her flying hair caught and smoothly braided and pinned to her rebellious little head, all her beloved short skirts grown, by some unfriendly miracle, unconscionably long, fettering the slim swiftness of the little black legs!

Defiant and sore at heart, she had put away childish things, and the little girl with a child's heart in a child's body had found herself on a sudden a "young lady"—and a "young lady" she had remained ever since,—until now, when that playmate whom she had dreamt of but never found had come striding to her across the centuries, young with the youth of the world, and demanded, in his joyous voice, that she play with him. Oh, how gladly, how gladly she would play! All her little cheated dreams and starving fancies ran on eager limping feet to meet this golden-headed stranger, and she let them run. The glamour of childhood was on her again; the breathless delight of it made her laugh aloud.

And then she stifled her mirth cautiously, because she could hear him coming back. There were steps on the hardwood floor outside, the curtains at the door were pushed carelessly aside, and—Cæsar and the lady frocked in green came in!

Priscilla, after one blank stare, crouched lower, and prayed that they might return whence they had come. Gone was the North Pole, gone the lonely cave, gone the glamour and the beauty and the joy,—all dissolved into thin air by the mockery of Cæsar's smile. There remained only Miss Priscilla Hampden, seated, by some inconceivable act of madness, on a hard floor behind some palm trees, with a rent in her white gauze dress and a curious blankness in her heart. If only they would go away! But they were not going away.

"I consider it heartless of you," accused the lady in the green dress lightly, and Priscilla wondered why she did not like her voice. It was, as the poet sang, linked sweetness long drawn out; but something bit and stung under the sweetness. Like ether—that was it, ether! "Heartless and stupid, too, to spend your time talking to a little white-faced chit when I particularly told you that

I had something to say to you. I should be angry, Cæsar: I spoil you."

"You flatter me," said the man smoothly. "I am somewhat conceited, Jacqueline; but not sufficiently so to believe that my defection has caused you any pain. I passed young Gilleon in the hall just now, with a mixture of such guilty joy and terrified triumph on his face that I immediately added him to the list of 'among those injured.' I trust that it isn't permanent."

"You are rather horrid," said Jacqueline negligently, and she trailed slowly across the room toward the brocade sofa. "You seem to think that I am a danger and a menace, my good Cæsar."

"May I smoke? Thank you. You have hit it with your customary skill, Jack. It must afford you a melancholy consolation. I see writ in flaming letters on your brow, 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.'"

"How poetic!" she murmured.

"Well, you are safe. You have never entered to try your fate."

"I am content to be a humble dweller on the threshold. And, do you know, I have half a mind to constitute myself a life-saving corps for your mangled victims."

Jacqueline rose with a movement as swift as her others had been slow, and the swish of her green skirts reminded Priscilla of a sword drawn sharply from its scabbard. "Exactly what do you mean?" she queried, and there was no change in the level sweetness of her voice.

"Exactly what I say," replied Charteris, and his voice was as level if it was not so sweet.

They stood facing each other in silence for a moment, and Priscilla contemplated the woman with a mixture of eagerness and perplexity. Her hasty description of her as a cross between a Raphael saint and a Rossetti sinner was surprisingly apt, she decided. Raphael

might have banded her hair just so over her little ears; but it was not of Raphael's meek brown: it rippled "yellow like ripe corn." Raphael might have drawn that broad forehead with its faint, clear brows; even the dove-gray eyes might have been his, had they not been possessed by a terrible restlessness,—straying, probing, seeking, driven hither and thither by some relentless force, at once weary and alert, never still, never at peace. Raphael might have limned the pure oval of her face and lovingly drawn the little, pear-shaped chin; but Raphael would have shuddered and recoiled before the insolent splendor of her mouth, its lurid beauty and cruel curves,—its shameless, sensuous glory. She was very tall and what the French call *fausse maigre,*—not slender, but actually thin, with a curious roundness of throat and breast and wrist. And in some extraordinary manner she looked at once tense and unstrung,—the crowning contradiction in a chain of contradictions.

For a brief moment Priscilla forgot her impossible position in her absorbed fascination; but she was brought relentlessly back to it by the woman's low laugh.

"How absurd!" she was saying. "Don't be so pompous, Leonard. And if I may venture a purely disinterested piece of advice, I should suggest saving your own soul before you start out on your philanthropic career as a life-saving crew."

"Thank you," rejoined Lord Charteris blandly. "You are more than kind; but I fear that mine is irretrievably lost. Is that all, Jack?"

"Dear me, no!" She motioned to a place beside her on the brocade sofa, and Priscilla stifled a moan of anguished exasperation. "Sit down. Who was the absurd infant that you were talking to this evening?"

"Thanks. I think that I'll stand. The absurd infant, as you so felicitously term her, was Miss Hampden. I may add, however, that she belied your de-

scription. She struck me as surprisingly mature, and I——" he stopped short.

There was a clash of plates and a tinkle of ice from the other side of the curtains, and then Mark's voice was raised in lamentation.

"Oh, bother! I've dropped one, and it was a squashy one, too. Did you break anything, Parker?"

"No, Sir. It was the claret cup, Sir. It slipped, Sir."

"Oh, well, it can't be helped; and there's a good deal left, anyway. Wait, I'll hold open the curtains."

Through the aperture advanced, or rather staggered, two waiters, one tottering under the burden of things to eat, the other reeling under the weight of things to drink. Mark followed them, laden with a large basket of fruit in one hand and an overflowing plate of small, sticky cakes in the other.

"I've found them!" he announced triumphantly. "Did you think I was never——" and then he paused, con-

fronted by Lord Charteris and the lady in green.

"Oh!" he said blankly. "Isn't she here?"

"She?" repeated the lady in green sweetly. "Who is she, Mr. Spencer?"

"Priscilla Hampden. I left her here."

"She must have gone—what a pity! Are you laying in provisions for a siege?"

In spite of his obvious bewilderment, Mark laughed. "How clever you are! No, it wasn't exactly a siege—though it might have been. But how long have you been here, Miss Campbell? Are you perfectly sure that she isn't here?"

"I am perfectly, perfectly sure, and I have been here for about ten minutes. Miss Hampden seems to be claiming more than her fair share of attention this evening—eh, Cæsar? Mr. Spencer, have you met Lord Charteris?"

"I'm not sure," said Mark, with his

winning smile. "I meet so many people. Have I, Lord Charteris?"

"I think not," Charteris assured him, smiling back. "I meet a fair number of them myself; but I rather think that I should remember you. Have you lost Miss Hampden?"

"It looks as though I had," admitted Mark, and added eagerly, "Would you mind if I left those things for a minute? You wouldn't? All right, Parker, you can put them down. Thanks a lot. You can, too—but I've forgotten your name again."

"Huggles, Sir," replied the imperturbable individual burdened with things to eat.

"Oh, yes, Huggles. What a jolly name! I hope you both aren't awfully tired. They're no end heavy. Thanks a lot. Good-night."

"Not at all, Sir. Thank you, Sir. Good-night, Sir."

"I like them a lot," Mark commented on the retreating figures. "They're so

simple and straightforward and obliging, and they say just what they mean without beating around the bush. Now I'll go and look for Priscilla."

"She has probably gone home," said Jacqueline Campbell.

"Oh," said Mark blankly, and the radiance died in his face. "Do you think so?" He stood quite still, like a bewildered child whose proffered gifts had been laughed to scorn, and Priscilla's heart smote her.

No foolish pride of hers should stamp that look on Mark's face! The grieved, betrayed child was standing silent with his rejected gifts still in his hands, and her whole soul flew to the rescue. She scrambled recklessly to her feet and took a long breath. Then, "I'm here," she announced faintly.

There was a moment's petrified silence, and then Mark's triumphant voice rang out:

"It's Priscilla! I knew she was here."

"Wait a minute," said Priscilla. "I'm coming out."

The green leaves parted with a horrid rattle, there was the sound of something rending, and out she came, praying fervently that she did not look so supremely miserable as she felt. The ghastly silence was broken by Mark's delighted laughter.

"I say, what a ripping place! How on earth did you find it, Priscilla?"

"I just saw it," said Priscilla.

"How interesting!" murmured Charteris, and behind the mask of his irony Priscilla fancied that she saw penetrating amazement and still more penetrating disappointment. "Jacqueline, do you know Miss Hampden? Miss Campbell, Miss Hampden. Is it impertinent to ask what you were doing in the ripping place?"

"I was hiding," said Miss Hampden, and felt the ruddy flames of outraged embarrassment engulf her from head to

foot. How loathsome the truth could sound! But how could she—how could she say to this Cæsar with the mocking smile, this Jacqueline with the cruel mouth, that she had been hiding in a cave near the North Pole because Mark had gone to dig up the provisions that some intrepid explorers had buried for future use and she was afraid that these same intrepid and outraged explorers might find her? It might be the truth, but right there she drew the line. Cæsar could think what he pleased, but he should never know how silly she had been.

"Hiding?" repeated Jacqueline amiably, and at the sheer insolence of her mouth Priscilla went white. "Dear me, how quaint!"

"We were playing a game," explained Mark eagerly. "We were trying to get away from——"

"Mark," Priscilla cut in ruthlessly, "I am a little tired. Will you take me back to Mother?"

"Are you going?" exclaimed Mark incredulously.

"I'm not very hungry," said Priscilla. "But if you'll come to tea to-morrow at four, I'll play. Good-night, Lord Charteris."

"Good-night," repeated Charteris slowly.

"I don't want him for tea," Priscilla told herself passionately. "I won't have him!" Aloud she said, "You, too, if you would care to."

"Thank you," said Charteris, "I should."

"Of course, I should be glad to see you too, Miss Campbell," said Priscilla desperately.

"And I should be glad to come," replied Jacqueline Campbell. "You are generous, Miss Hampden. Good-night."

"At five, then," Priscilla said firmly and distinctly.

Lord Charteris raised his eyebrows. "Five? I am afraid that I can't come after four. Will that be too early?"

"No," replied Priscilla mendaciously, and despised herself for a coward. "It will be very nice. After all, Mark, I think that I had rather go alone. Please don't come." She could feel his hurt eyes on her as she went toward the door, and she turned toward him, relenting.

"Come at three," she said in a swift undertone, and Mark laughed his relief.

"Rather!" he cried joyously. "I wanted to talk to you alone awfully. What a dear you are!"

And Priscilla fled before the set mockery of Cæsar's face.

V

THE PLOT UNFOLDS

THE doorbell! Priscilla sank back in the great armchair with a little sigh of content. Mark had not gone to sleep this time apparently: the clock had barely finished striking three, and she could hear his feet on the stairs. It was absurd that she should be so glad to see him after so brief a space; but the absurdity was a fact. She literally missed this boy whom she had met for the first time two days before—she literally longed to see him. He was fresh air and clean water to her parched little soul. It was as though some wild flower had been planted, at a millionaire's caprice, in the unsought shelter of a greenhouse, and, swaying in the tepid air of a conservatory, had forgotten its heritage of all outdoors; and then, one day, some careless hand had broken one of the dusty panes, and in through the little

opening had poured all the wealth of blue sky and golden sun and madcap breezes and the smell of the sturdy, green, growing things—in through the broken pane had poured all its lost heritage! Small wonder that the little flower strained eagerly toward the opening; small wonder that she strained, too!

There was a hand at the door. It opened, and through the opening strode Mark, with all the lost heritage in his hands, and all the joy of the world at his heels. And Priscilla forgot dignity and decorum and maidenly reticence—forgot everything in the world save that he was her playmate and that she was glad, glad, glad to see him—and flew across the long room on wings to meet those outstretched hands.

"I've been sitting on your front doorstep for fifteen minutes," announced Mark. "You can't think how everybody stared!"

"Oh, can't I?" jeered Priscilla hap-

pily. "May I ask why you took up your abode on my front doorstep for fifteen minutes?"

"Because you didn't ask me till three, and I didn't want to lose a second. It wasn't half bad, anyway. It's a glorious day, and the jolliest little yellow kitten came and played with me."

"You must have made a charming rural scene!" laughed Priscilla. "But I am glad you aren't late. Sit down, and let's begin right away."

"Begin what?" inquired Mark, obediently sitting down.

"Why, playing, of course. How can you be so stupid, Mark?"

"I don't know," said Mark. "That yellow kitten was the jolliest little beggar, Priscilla!"

"Was he?" said Priscilla unhelpfully.

"You'd just love him!"

"Would I?" Priscilla remarked unemotionally. She was slightly irritated that Mark should be so obviously more

absorbed in a mere yellow kitten than in her intensely interesting self.

"Don't you like kittens?" Mark demanded in pained astonishment.

"Sometimes," she replied coldly.

Mark smiled at her ingratiatingly. "Oh, Priscilla, wouldn't you like one now? It wouldn't take me two minutes —and it's so little and fat! It would make the most gorgeous polar bear!"

Priscilla melted before that smile. "Of course I'd love it," she said graciously. "And it will add an immense amount of local color as a polar bear. Only do be quick, Mark!"

A tornado swept across the room and crashed down the stairs. There was a respite of as much as thirty seconds after the front door was flung open, its hinges squeaking frantically, then there was a reverberating bang, and the tornado started on its upward rush. It entered the still, green room as tempestuously as it had left it, and deposited a yellow kitten in Priscilla's lap. She

caught up the palpitating, furry mite, its small ears flattening and its topaz eyes glistening, with a pitiful little cry.

"Oh, Mark, what a darling! It's such a little, little thing!"

"I love little things," said Mark gravely, and he stroked the kitten with an experimental forefinger. "The littler they are the better I love them. Is your mother better, Priscilla?"

"No, she's worse," laughed Priscilla. "Was it thinking of little things that reminded you of her? She's suffocating upstairs now, poor dear, with sheer excitement."

"I'm always suffocating with excitement," confided Mark. "Living is the most exciting thing there is. Do you mind if I sit on the floor? All these chairs are so dreadfully little."

"I thought that you loved little things," mocked Priscilla.

"That's when they're alive," explained Mark serenely, from the floor; "but I

love big things, too,—the sea, and the wind, and the mountains——"

"I should say that you loved everything!" she laughed; but there was an ache in her throat.

"I should say that I did, too," agreed Mark. "But, do you know, it's nearly always the little things that are the biggest. Felicity was tiny,—she was tinier than you are,—but Sire said that one of her hands held all the joys of life, and the other all the mysteries of death; that her two lips were the gates to Paradise, and that her two eyes were Paradise itself. Which do you think is bigger, Priscilla, the Kensington Museum or a baby? The dome of St. Peter's or a star?"

"I think—I think that Felicity must have been the happiest woman in the world. Do you look like her, Mark?"

"No, I don't look like anyone. Felicity said that I just looked the way she wanted me to. She said that she dreamed I'd look like me—before she

ever saw me, you know. Sometimes I think that's all I am,—just Felicity's dreams."

Priscilla held the kitten very tight, and fought desperately against the sudden, urgent desire to cry that clutched at her throat like a cruel hand. Her playmate was sitting at her feet, not a hand's breadth away, and yet she felt more lonely than she had ever felt in all her lonely little life. There he sat, most friendly, most radiant, most dear; yet it was as though that clear voice came to her across the tumult of a thousand years, as though that clear face smiled at her through the mists of a thousand leagues. The room was very still. Priscilla held her breath, and stared at her playmate with great, terrified, impotent eyes. Then she broke the terrible silence into a million bits with a little, shivering laugh.

"How clever of you to make all her dreams come true! But what are we going to play? We are wasting minutes

and minutes, Mark! If we aren't careful it will be hours and hours and hours!"

"Give me my kitten, and I'll tell you," demanded Mark.

"It's my kitten," retorted Priscilla, and the terror was gone from her eyes. In its place shone the unquestioning adoration of a little maid for her hero, and the protective adoration of a mother for her child, and the dear, joyous camaraderie of one playmate for another, and deep, deep, deep in their farthest depths stirred that which was a welding and a blending of the three—deep in their depths stirred love.

"Put it on the floor," urged Mark; "then we'll see whose kitten it is. Play fair, Priscilla! There!"

The yellow morsel shook itself and staggered experimentally out into the green sea of carpet.

"There!" cried Mark triumphantly, his face flaming with excitement. "It's coming to me, Priscilla! Priscilla, look!

It likes me best, and it's coming straight to me!"

There was no doubt about it—the kitten was rapidly advancing on wavering, unsteady legs, growing more confident at every step. There was a scurry of flying white, and Priscilla caught it up with a little crow of triumph.

"There!" she announced defiantly, holding it close to her neck. "You can't have it. It wanted to come to me all the time."

Mark made for her with an indignant shout of laughter, and from the doorway there came an answering ripple. Priscilla lifted startled eyes to meet the mocking ones of Jacqueline Campbell.

"Bravo, Miss Hampden!" she applauded softly. "I hold it most excellent strategy uncompromisingly to seize what will not come to you. Oh, pray don't rise! I fear that I am a trifle late."

But Priscilla had risen and stood motionless in the center of the room,

the kitten still in her hands,—a stately enough little figure, with the pearls gleaming at her throat and wrath in her eyes. The first time that she had been caught had been bad enough; but this second was intolerable! And unreasoning hatred for the tall woman standing in the doorway suddenly flooded her, leaving her breathless for a minute.

"No, you are not late," she said quietly.

"Surely I heard you say three?" murmured Jacqueline, and her gloved fingers brushed Priscilla's. "I am frightfully absentminded, and the hours were rather confused; but I could have sworn to three. Was I wrong?"

"I said five," Priscilla replied as quietly as before.

"Ah, how stupid of me! But you will have to forgive me again—you are excellent at forgiving. What an adorable small kitten!"

"Isn't it?" acquiesced Mark enthusiastically, the cloud that had swept over

his face at Jacqueline's entry quite dispelled. She had made a mistake, and she was sorry, and that was all there was about that. His game with Priscilla would simply have to be put off to another time. "Oh, Miss Campbell, how wonderful you look in that dress! Doesn't she, Priscilla?"

"It is a charming dress," said Priscilla.

Jacqueline had been peeling off her long suède gloves, and stood pulling them through her fingers. Her eyes considered Priscilla curiously for a minute after this remark, and then fluttered to Mark.

"You are both too good," she deprecated gracefully. "My poor frock! It is getting sadly shabby."

"The dress is beautiful; but it isn't that," he explained eagerly. "It's you who are so lovely in it. You look just the way Undine would have if she had got her clothes in Paris,—copied after her own designs, you know, of a green

wave trimmed with silver spray. And the fluffy white feather in your hat is the foam."

"Undine!" repeated Jacqueline slowly. "Do you think that I look like Undine, Mr. Spencer?"

"I don't think that you look quite quiet enough for Undine," Mark considered thoughtfully. "You're more like the Lorelei. If I shut my eyes I could see you quite clearly sitting on a rock and singing and always looking for something. I'm awfully sorry for the Lorelei."

"You are with the minority," said Jacqueline, and she leaned back in her chair, veiling the bitterness of her eyes with broad, white lids. "The fisherman claims most of the sympathy."

"I'm sorry for him, too," Mark admitted; "but I've always had the idea that she might have loved him and wanted him to come up to her, you know. It must have been ghastly for her to have to watch him being dashed to pieces

on the rocks below, and not be able to help him."

"You are right," nodded Jacqueline. "It must have been rather ghastly, especially as she knew that it was all her own fault."

"I have been brought up to look on the yellow-haired lady with a suspicious eye," remarked Priscilla. "I thought that she dashed a good many fishermen to bits, singing cheerfully as she did it. I imagined that she was a heartless little jade, without the indispensable equipment of a soul."

"That's it!" cried Mark triumphantly. "That's what she's looking for —a soul! That's what makes her eyes so restless."

"And mine, Mr. Spencer?" laughed Jacqueline Campbell softly.

"I don't—know. But of course I do: everyone has a soul."

"So they have. So had the Lorelei to start with, I fancy. But perhaps she lost it in the green sea, or traded it off

for the golden jewels. On the whole, I'm not sure that she didn't make a good bargain. What do you think, Miss Hampden?"

Priscilla lifted wide eyes from an earnest scrutiny of the kitten. "I can imagine times when souls would be superfluous encumbrances," she assented demurely, "and the jewels were probably very nice and shiny."

"And if she dropped them into the sea too, in an absentminded moment," said Jacqueline, "I suppose she should thank her lucky little silver stars that she had had them to play with, and forget all about that immortal trifle called a soul."

Priscilla deposited a light kiss on top of the kitten's fluffy head. "Perhaps her eyes were so restless because she wanted more shining jewelry," she suggested sweetly. "I don't think that a soul would have been particularly useful in her business."

"Oh, come!" protested Mark indig-

nantly. "Of course she wanted her soul back. Don't you think so, Miss Campbell?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," agreed Jacqueline; "only it is easier to get more jewelry than more souls; so she probably made the best of it. There's no use crying over lost souls."

"How extremely philosophic!" remarked Charteris from the threshold. "May I come in? The butler told me to come up here. He seemed oppressed by many cares and laden down with tea-things. Am I supposed to shake hands with the kitten, Miss Hampden?"

"I shouldn't advise it," said Priscilla gravely. "Kittens have claws, you know—even little bits of kittens. Put the tea-things here, Lane, and bring the hot water at once. Sugar, Miss Campbell?"

"Thanks, two lumps, and as much cream as you can spare. I am un-dieting nowadays. Aren't you going to speak to me, Leonard?"

"My dear Jacqueline, is it possible? I could not believe my very fortunate eyes! I understood that you were coming at five, and I was desolated at the prospect of missing you."

"It was so stupid of me!" murmured Jacqueline, selecting a fat little cake with jam inside it and a thin little cake with frosting on top of it, and balancing them with infinite care on the edge of her saucer. "I got all mixed up and came at three. Wasn't it atrocious of me?"

"No sugar and a very little cream, thanks," Charteris replied to Priscilla's inquiring brows. "So your phenomenal memory had played you false, Jack! Well, it is the first time that it has tricked you in my remembrance—you may lay that flattering unction to your soul!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Jacqueline admonished serenely. "My phenomenal memory is a figment of your phenomenal brain. I have just been explaining my

chronic lack of it to Miss Hampden. Under severe emotional strain I have even been known, like Alice, to forget myself."

"How you have tricked us all!" said Charteris admiringly. "Upon my word, you *are* clever, Jack! Do you know, I could have sworn that you never forgot anything in your life."

"You are mixing me up with that woman with the firm bang and the receding chin who took you in to dinner last night. She vibrated between quoting you socialistic statistics and all the immoral passages from your books. I heard her."

"So did I," said Charteris. "She was quite the most atrocious creature with which I ever came in contact. If there is one thing I hate more than a moralist it's a socialist, and if there's one thing that I hate more than either, it's a suffragette. But to encounter a moral socialistic suffragette is a fore-

taste of hell on earth. I thirsted for blood."

"Poor Cæsar!" condoled Jacqueline soothingly. "But it was apparently a choice of the lesser evil. I was there too, if you had cared to talk to me."

"It would have taken a considerably braver, and, I may add, a considerably more foolhardy, man than myself to have claimed your attention last night, Jacqueline."

"You mean Harry Gilleon? Oh, I should have spared you a few words."

"Is he that awfully nice fellow with the happy eyes?" Mark demanded suddenly from the shadows.

"He is that awfully nice fellow," acquiesced Charteris; "quite the nicest fellow I know, in fact. He is engaged to my little niece Nancy; so it's small wonder that his eyes are happy."

"I did like him," said Mark emphatically. "I don't think that his eyes looked exactly happy last night, though; they looked awfully excited."

"Perhaps he was excited," said Jacqueline sweetly. "He's rather an excitable young person."

"Nancy is excitable too," Charteris smiled reminiscently; "but she balances it by being the most adorable young woman that I know."

"How rude of you!" rebuked Jacqueline. "However, I'll grant you that she is quite indecently pretty and that she has a positive vocation for being nice. She is even nice to me."

"Is she so pretty?" asked Priscilla.

"She's a red-headed little thing with a good complexion," replied Jacqueline accurately but deceptively. "Haven't you ever seen her, the youngest daughter of the Duchess of Cleves?"

"Oh, I know who you mean!" cried Mark. "She has reddy-gold hair that looks like a wreath of flowers, and eyes like brown pansies, and a mouth like a flower, too. Do you know," he added reflectively, "that every time I look at her I want to kiss her. I never felt

that way about anyone before. I want to kiss her awfully!"

He said it with such obvious sincerity that he was greeted by a burst of sympathetic laughter.

"It's a very laudable and not startlingly original desire," remarked Charteris dryly. "But I'll stake any amount that Harry is the only lucky beggar who has ever had it gratified. Nancy's pride would make Lucifer's resemble a poor relation."

"Poor child! let's hope that it may never have a fall," murmured Jacqueline. "May I have some more tea, Miss Hampden? Do you know, men actually chant her praises in my presence! It's a dangerous game. If I were a man, I should as soon think of brandishing a lighted torch about a keg of gunpowder as praising one attractive woman to another; particularly when you are praising a pink-cheeked débutante to a woman who is trying to forget that there are such things."

"Don't you like her?" demanded Mark.

"Like her?" considered Jacqueline, stirring her tea. "Now that you speak of it, I don't believe that I do like her. But she is always alarmingly nice to me. I wonder why?"

"Most people are afraid of you," said Charteris. "Perhaps she thinks, my dear Jack, that there is very little to fear."

"Perhaps — she does," acquiesced Jacqueline slowly, and she smiled vaguely.

Charteris stared at her intently for a moment; but her eyes were veiled again —she was watching the light play in an emerald on her finger. He rose abruptly.

"I must go," he said. "It has been charming. Jacqueline, the motor is outside. May I drop you somewhere?"

"Thanks, no," replied Jacqueline. "I'm having much too nice a time to go

just yet. I'll see you soon again, I suppose?"

"Surely. Good afternoon, Spencer." He held Priscilla's hand for a fraction longer than necessary, looking at her with searching eyes. Then he smiled, almost gayly. "How old are you, Miss Hampden?"

Priscilla smiled back at him bravely. "Old enough to know better. Do you ever play games, Lord Charteris?"

"I never stop," he said, and his eye wandered to Jacqueline. "I may add that I am rarely beaten. Here's to a speedy meeting, Mademoiselle Methuselah!"

"May Time stride by in seven-leagued boots!" laughed Priscilla. "Good afternoon, Lord Charteris."

"Leonard has been talking in a most symbolic manner," commented Jacqueline, and she glanced mockingly toward the closing door; "but he is sacrificing some of his inimitable flippancy. Did you know that he was considered quite

the most depraved and delightful individual in London, Miss Hampden?"

"What an enviable reputation!" rejoined Priscilla lightly. "Unfortunately, I have not been able to verify it. I know him only through his books."

"Then you are more to be pitied than scorned. Cæsar's books! They form a protracted series of youthful indiscretions that far outweigh his more mature and less literary ones. In fact, they outweigh almost anything I know."

"Doesn't he ever write any more?" asked Priscilla.

"If he does he manages to conceal it very skillfully. I heard a nice little maiden lady ask him once why he didn't, and he told her in the most chivalrous manner possible that he didn't believe in profaning the altar fire with defiled hands. She turned light green with scandalized emotion, poor thing."

"The altar fire!" repeated Priscilla

softly. "Then he wasn't always the most depraved and delightful person in London?"

"Good Heavens, no! He was always uncannily brilliant; but he used to be the very pink of propriety. I confess that I can't imagine it. But they say that he used to go about like Saint George and the dragon all rolled into one, belching forth the fire of his ideals and the smoke of his convictions, and quenching them both, if they became too ardent, with the gentle rain of mercy and the milk of human kindness. He brought peace in one hand and a sword in the other—and it made it rather exciting, because you never could be quite sure which he was going to use. There was no method whatever in his madness."

"And then what happened?" asked Priscilla.

"Oh, then his brother married Leonard's fiancée, under Leonard's very nose, and the embryo saint became an accom-

plished sinner in an amazingly short space of time. I don't believe that he has ever had a relapse."

"She must have been a horrid kind of girl," commented Mark with impartial disdain.

"So she must," agreed Jacqueline. "But Cæsar has been taking it out of the rest of her sex ever since. He must have evened up their little score some time ago. Mr. Spencer, would you consider it very brazen and heartless of me if I asked you to take me home? It is beginning to get dark, and I have no carriage."

"I'd love to take you," said Mark, "only I promised Priscilla that——"

"Of course you must go," broke in Priscilla. "I have been longing for a nap before dinner, and now I shall get it. Good-night. Can you see your way out?"

"Are you sure you don't mind, Priscilla?" asked Mark gently. "I'd much rather stay with you; but I remembered

that it wouldn't be polite to say so. Only, if you mind a bit, I'll stay."

"Don't be silly," retorted Priscilla ruthlessly. "I shouldn't have you stay for anything: I'd much rather that you went. I'm——"

"Coming, Mr. Spencer?" called Jacqueline from the hall.

"Coming!" cried Mark. "Oh, Priscilla, you are such a comfort—you always understand everything! May I come again soon?"

Priscilla laughed up at him helplessly. "Yes, come very soon," she nodded. "And I'll endeavor to provide against such distracting influences as yellow kittens and green Loreleis. Good-night, Mark."

"I don't think that I'll go," announced Mark cheerfully. "I think I'd rather stay."

"Mr. Spencer!" came the clear voice from the hall.

Priscilla gave him a little push.

"Run!" she commanded briefly. "Only —come back soon! Good-night."

She stood still in the middle of the darkening room, listening to his feet on the stairs, to the sudden murmur of voices in the hall, and the closing of the outer door. Then, "I think that she is rather a hateful person," she said to the kitten, with a forlorn little laugh. "What do you think?"

The kitten remained noncommittal and Priscilla climbed up on the window-seat and unfastened the casement window. The gray street was deserted and very still; so still that there came back to her straining ears a distant catch of laughter. Something shook her at the sound, and her hands flew to her ears in an involuntary effort to close it out. Then she drew a long, careful breath and turned slowly back from the open window to the dim room.

VI

EXIT A MINOR CHARACTER

It was a tiny room in a tiny apartment, and yet in some mysterious manner it gave the impression of indefinable space, as though an artist had painted it, handling lights and shades in a masterly manner, brushing in his effects with a broad yet delicate stroke. The room had obviously started out to be Adams, with its prim, silken hangings and exquisite satinwood furnishings; but some whimsical hand had hung a Whistler nocturne in grays and greens on the paneled wall and balanced a little Tanagra figurine in one corner against a faintly tinted waxen bust from mediæval Italy in another. The same hand, gifted with that diviner harmony that welcomes contrasts and laughs at laws, had arranged a handful of wild flowers in the bowl of an old Roman lamp, and placed flank to flank on the bare round table

Sappho's Odes and Saint Francis' Fioretti.

The only occupant of the room was young Gilleon, who stood frowning down with bright, troubled eyes at the inscrutable waxen lady from the Renaissance. She looked so meek and yet so maddening—he wondered vaguely what thoughts were weaving beneath the bright jewel on her forehead. There was a faint rustle in the doorway, and he turned, his hands working nervously. Jacqueline came slowly forward, her blue-green draperies slipping behind her like water.

"Oh, my beautiful!" cried young Gilleon; and her lips curled.

"Careful, Harry!" she cautioned mockingly.

The boy came a step nearer. "I've done what you told me to," he said. "Please be good to me, Jacqueline! It was—horrible!"

"Poor little boy," condoled Jacqueline,—"but a good little boy! He has

learned that it isn't nice to make love to two ladies at once."

Harry sat down on the little stool at her feet, staring up at her with bewildered eyes. "I wish I could understand," he said slowly. "I'm such an awful duffer, you know. I had a sort of idea that you couldn't love except one person—that you lived happily ever afterward—when you came."

"So I'm cast for the rôle of serpent in this Eden," murmured Jacqueline. "You're not flattering, Harry."

"Oh, please, don't!" he protested miserably. "You hurt so when you say things like that! I'm just trying to understand. If—if I found someone else, Nancy will too, won't she? Won't she, Jacqueline?"

Jacqueline stirred a little, and then she smiled again. "*Chi sa?*" she evaded lightly, "which being interpreted, little Philistine, means 'Who knows?' There are a good many ugly things and a good many pleasant things that go mas-

querading about this weary world as love, my good child: she's apt to fall on one of them."

"But the real love?" pursued Harry eagerly. "The one that isn't masquerading? That's what I want to know, Jacqueline. How do you know it?"

"The real love!" mused Jacqueline. "Little sweet Penelope waiting at home while the sirens sing! Who knows enough to clap his hands over his ears and close out the song? Who knows which is the more real—Penelope's weaving or the siren's music? It's a matter of taste, Master Hal!"

"Look at me!" begged Harry. "Look at me, my beautiful! When you look at me I forget Nan's face when I told her—I forget everything except how wonderful you are. Oh, Jacqueline, how wonderful you are!"

Jacqueline leaned suddenly forward, her cold face flaming. "Am I so wonderful," she demanded tensely, "so won-

derful that no one could help loving me, more wonderful than anyone else?"

Young Gilleon lifted dizzy eyes to hers. "I can't say it," he whispered breathlessly; "but you know, my beautiful!"

Jacqueline gave a little catch of exultant laughter. "Am I more beautiful than that Hampden child—the little white-faced thing with the big eyes? Tell me, Harry!"

"You are the most wonderful thing in the world!" cried the boy. "And when you laugh like that I go mad! Oh, Jacqueline!"

Jacqueline brushed his thick brown hair with the tips of her fingers, and laughed again. "I'm glad of that," she told him. "What a nice goose you are, Harry! Did your little sweetheart make a scene?"

"Nancy?" he said in a low voice. "No. She didn't say anything; but her face——" He lifted his hand to his

eyes. "I thought I had killed her," he said simply.

"Oh, dear me, no!" laughed Jacqueline. "We aren't so fragile as that, we women. But our pride dies hard sometimes—and I grant you that it doesn't look pretty."

"I thought that hell was too good for me," said Harry Gilleon, and his clear young voice was hard. "But the awful part about it was that I didn't care. I only wanted you, Jacqueline—I had to have you!"

"Did you?" queried Jacqueline. "Poor little Harry! You may kiss my hand if you want to."

He buried his hot face for a minute in the hollow of her cool, slim palms. "Jacqueline," he said, and his voice came to her a little muffled, as though from a distance, "I can ask you better now than when I'm looking at you. I—I'm awfully afraid of you, you know."

"Yes?" encouraged Jacqueline.

"That is rather sweet of you. What are you going to ask me, Harry?"

"When—when are you going to marry me, my beautiful? I can't wait long."

Jacqueline drew her hands away quickly and rose suddenly to her feet. "Are you mad?" she asked. "Marry you? I? You must be dreaming!"

Harry Gilleon remained sitting on the little stool, with his head still bowed. "You are laughing," he said slowly, and his carefully controlled voice was rather dreadful as it cracked under the strain; "but you shouldn't laugh, you know."

"I am not laughing," said Jacqueline disdainfully. "Why should I laugh? And why should I marry you, pray?"

Then he lifted his face, and at sight of it she winced and turned away.

"Why, indeed?" said Harry Gilleon. "I think I see now."

Jacqueline trailed slowly to the win-

dow and stood drumming on it with restless fingers. Then she heard steps coming toward her.

"Are you afraid to turn round?" asked that dreadful voice. "You need not be afraid. I will not hurt you. I would not soil my fingers."

Jacqueline swung about, her head high; but she kept her eyes from meeting his. "You are insolent," she said. "And you are rather silly. Will you be good enough to go?"

"I am going."

She turned back to the window, and there was a moment's pause. Then she could hear the steps going away. They paused at the door, and then went slowly on downstairs. Once they stumbled; then a door opened and closed very softly, and she turned back from the window. The nice boy with the happy eyes had gone. She shivered a little, and then, shaking herself slightly, walked to the mirror over the mantel. There she stood, resting her elbows upon

it and pushing the bright hair back from her brows with slim, white fingers.

"Am I so wonderful?" she asked softly of the still face and the restless eyes in the glass. And even as she looked a slow flush mounted, staining its stillness, and she dropped her eyes with a low, happy little laugh like a girl's. But it was not of young Gilleon that she was thinking.

VII

THE PLOT THICKENS

MARK was having a birthday party. It had finally assumed the outward and visible form of a picnic, and after an exceedingly hot and dusty run from London and considerable scouring of the countryside a motley group of eight people found themselves seated on eight cushions under a large tree, and five of them were asking themselves, violently, what on earth had induced them to come. The five were Charteris, Jacqueline, Cousin Cynthia, Captain Denby, and the pretty and frivolous Countess of Germaine. The three who didn't ask were Mark, Priscilla, and Rupert, the adored son of the Countess, who was eight years old, red headed, and incorrigible, but possessed of infinite charm. He was now undergoing the pangs of first love, and had informed Priscilla that his life was at her

disposal, to make or mar according to her capricious fancy.

"This is glorious!" sighed Mark happily, as he surveyed the surrounding faces and the open hampers with impartial satisfaction. "I did want to go to the Tower of London awfully, but next to that this is perfect. Rupert, we represent menial service at this festal board. Didn't I say 'menial service' well, Cynthia?"

"Oh, Mark!" protested Cynthia feebly.

"Well, remember Uncle Hal, and don't get familiar with us," Mark warned her cheerfully. "Familiarity with the domestics and others connected with menial service is one of my besetting sins, and I don't care to see it grow in the family. Had you rather be Parker or Huggles, Rupert?"

"I'd rather be Huggles," said Rupert promptly.

"I rather wanted to be Huggles myself," confessed Mark. "But it's all

right, old fellow. I shouldn't have consulted you. Don't forget, Huggles, that your vocabulary is limited. You say nothing but 'Yessir' and 'Nosir,' except when you say 'Yesmilord' and 'Nomilord.' Of course, you adapt yourself when speaking to members of the opposite sex. And I advise you to say 'Thankyousir' at least once every two minutes."

"Yessir," assented Huggles' substitute imperturbably.

"And if you smile you're done for. Don't forget."

"Nosir," Huggles assured him with modulated fervor.

"On your mark—get set—go!" admonished Mark, and he fell on one hamper, while Huggles fell on the other.

"Thankyousir," intoned Huggles as he fell.

"Gad! that's a bright boy of yours, Elizabeth," Charteris said admiringly. "But isn't he delicate? Such prodigal mentality in one so——"

"He's as strong as an ox!" protested the Countess indignantly. "He's never been ill for a day in his life, and——" She stopped, flushing prettily under the storm of laughter that greeted her defense.

"He strikes me as being sicklied o'er with a pale cast of thought," Charteris informed her gravely. "There's a clear, transparent tinge about his——"

"You're trying to tease me," defied the Countess. "Ugh! Rupert, what is the ghastly stuff that you poured in my glass?"

Rupert turned inquiring eyes to the other menial. "You may tell her, Huggles," said Mark; "but don't wax eloquent over it. Sandwidge, Milord?"

"Ginger pop, Milady," Huggles informed the Countess, and continued to administer the noxious fluid to the ring of empty glasses.

"Ginger pop!" gasped the Countess. "Mark! I sent a whole case of cham-

pagne to your rooms. Do you hear me? A whole case!"

"Yesmilady."

"And two hampers full of pâtés and galantines and salads and sweets. These aren't my things. Cynthia, what are you eating? Not—not a hard-boiled egg!"

"I think it must be," admitted Cynthia, surveying it with guilty interest.

"Hard-boiled eggs!" moaned the Countess faintly. Then she pointed a stern finger at Priscilla. "Miss Hampden, you needn't try to hide that—it will just spoil your frock. What is it?"

"I was trying to decide," answered Priscilla gravely. "I couldn't quite make up my mind whether it was caviare on toast or stuffed anchovies."

"It was a ham sandwich," returned the Countess. "You can't deceive me: I've seen the awful things. Oh, Mark, how could you?" The distress in her

tone was so genuine that Mark relinquished the despised sandwiches and came and knelt beside her.

"Oh, Aunt Elizabeth darling, it's a picnic! What you sent was a perfectly wonderful supper, and if you want to we'll have a dance when we go home and eat it all up. Only you can't eat things like that on a picnic. It would be like putting on a high collar to wear in bathing."

The Countess surveyed the brilliant, earnest face before her sternly for a minute, and then relented. "Mark, you are perfectly intolerable, and I don't see how anyone can abide you; but I love you to distraction! Did Rupert know about this dreadful party?"

"He didn't exactly know," temporized Mark.

"Rupert, come here."

"Yesmilady."

"Did your Cousin Mark tell you about this party?"

"Yesmilady."

"I thought so! You're not to eat one hard-boiled egg. Do you understand?"

"Yesmilady."

"Nor drink a drop of that sickening sweet stuff with the horrid name."

"Thankyoumilady."

"And you take the ham out of the sandwiches and just eat the bread and butter."

"Nomilady."

"What do you mean by 'Nomilady'? It doesn't make a particle of sense unless you are trying to be impertinent. Are you trying to be impertinent?"

"Nomilady."

"He was probably tired of saying 'Yesmilady,'" suggested Mark helpfully. "Perhaps he said it just for a change."

"Well, it's gone far enough. If he doesn't behave instantly, he shall be punished severely as soon as he gets home."

"Thankyoumilady," replied the grateful Huggles.

"Mark, stop him!" implored the Countess desperately. "If he says that again, I shall go mad—and it's all your fault!"

"Huggles, you may consider yourself dismissed with one minute's notice," said Mark gravely. "Your manner as a domestic is above reproach; but I admit that it lacks a certain filial flavor. The minute is up!"

"If I take out the ham, may I eat all the bread and butter I want?" demanded the ex-menial promptly.

"Yes, Darling: only do eat it slowly. Mark, is this all we have?"

"Oh, no!" said Mark airily. "We have lots of oranges with holes in them, and lumps of sugar and currant buns."

"What are the holes for?" asked the Countess feebly.

"To suck through, of course. Won't you suck an orange, Miss Campbell?"

Jacqueline looked up with a slow smile. "Thanks a lot. It sounds en-

trancing; but I don't think I will. What are you doing, Leonard?"

"I'm peeling a hard-boiled egg," he informed her genially. "This is the first interesting party that I've attended in fifteen years. You have given me a new lease of life, Spencer."

Rupert was making a votive offering to Priscilla, ruddy as his flaming head. "It's the ham," he explained, "from between the bread and butter. I'd feel much better if you ate it. I shouldn't mind a bit then."

"Ham has ever been my ruling passion," proclaimed Priscilla, throwing truth and caution to the winds and attacking the ham. "But how thoughtful of you to save it for me, Rupert dear! And brave too! Your Cousin Mark has been looking at you in a most peculiar and menacing manner ever since he saw you detaching it from the slices of bread and butter. He looked as if he were saying over and over again to himself, 'Ham or your life! Ham or your

life!' I think you deserve a V. C. at least."

"Oh, I don't think it was so awfully brave," Rupert assured her modestly. "I'm not afraid of Cousin Mark much. Besides, I didn't see him looking at me."

"Cousin Rupert, you're an honor to your country," declared Mark. "Aunt Elizabeth, may he have some jam sandwiches for dessert if we take out the jam?"

"Don't be silly," retorted the stern mother discouragingly. "How can you take out jam from between sandwiches?"

"I own that you can't remove it so completely as ham," Mark acknowledged. "A hint, a suggestion, of jam is apt to cling to the bread and butter. But it's an experiment worth trying."

"You're simply ridiculous," rebuked the Countess.

"Captain Denby hasn't said one word

since we came," said Rupert abruptly. "He doesn't do anything but sit and look at Cousin Cynthia—the way Cousin Mark looked at the ham."

Cynthia turned a distressed pink at this poetic comparison, and Captain Denby said "Ha!" very loudly, and tugged alarmingly at his mustache.

Jacqueline began to pull herself together, rising slowly to her slim height. "I'm getting a bit stiff," she explained, "and the sun's on me there. It's on you too, Mr. Spencer. I wonder if you wouldn't like to take our cushions over to that tree? It looks most beautifully shady."

"I'd rather——" began Mark, and then stopped, reined up short by the expression of consummate horror on Cynthia's pink countenance. He scrambled obediently to his feet. "Is it the chestnut tree?" he asked docilely, seizing the cushions.

"It may well be," she assured him; "though I don't know the tree of knowl-

edge itself from a weeping willow. It's the one that I'm pointing at."

"Then it's a chestnut," said Mark. "Won't you come too, Priscilla?"

"Miss Hampden is telling me a most thrilling tale," said Charteris; "so she can't go. But you may take anyone else."

"I'll come," sighed Rupert regretfully, with a last lingering glance at his fickle deity.

"Rupert, sit down at once!" commanded his mother sternly. "Your Cousin Mark has an atrocious influence on you, and I don't care to expose you to it more than necessary."

Jacqueline drew a light breath of relief. "I see that we are going to have to put up with each other," she said; "so let us make for the chestnut tree as rapidly as possible. This sun is doing worse things to me than it ever did to Icarus."

Mark remained silent for some time after they were installed. He was feel-

ing as nearly cross as it was possible for him to feel. He had so wanted to talk to Priscilla, and now—

"A penny for your thoughts," broke in Jacqueline.

Mark shook his head. "They were rather horrid," he told her. "And I never can think quickly enough to make up others."

"But I can guess," said Jacqueline. She could not look at him: when she did, his radiant charm shook her through and through, so that her very voice was unsteady. "You were wishing that Miss Hampden was here. Own up!"

"You are ever so much the cleverest person I know," laughed Mark. "Was it awfully rude? I know that it's awfully silly. Think of missing a person that isn't more than a hundred yards from you!"

"I believe that I shall tell you a secret," said Jacqueline slowly. "I brought you over here because I wanted

to give Priscilla a chance to talk to Leonard. It was rather generous of me; but I couldn't refuse."

"You mean he asked you to?" demanded Mark, a faint tinge of bewilderment in his tone.

"No," murmured Jacqueline, "he didn't ask me."

"Oh," said Mark thoughtfully, and the bewilderment deepened a trifle. "You mean that she did."

Jacqueline dug a series of small holes in the earth with the tip of her parasol and remained discreetly silent.

Then Mark laughed suddenly, his old, blithe laugh. "Well, it was rather horrid of Priscilla," he said gayly, "because she knew that I particularly wanted to talk to her. But she probably had something important to say to him."

"I rather think that she wanted him to say something to her—something very important."

"Is it a secret?" demanded Mark eagerly. "Do tell me! I simply adore

secrets! I can spend days and days telling them to one person at a time. It is a secret?"

"Can't you guess what it is?" asked Jacqueline, and she lifted her eyes and looked straight into his. There was no mistaking the implication in her tone, and Mark whitened and his eyes widened under the shock of surprise. Jacqueline turned hot and cold with furious pain. It was true, then!

"Do you mean that she is in——"

"Hush!" she admonished gayly. "It's a secret, remember." She bent toward him with sudden charming candor. "I should never have told you if I had not known what great friends you were. Now you can help."

"Yes," said Mark blankly.

"You are great friends, aren't you?"

"Great friends," repeated Mark mechanically.

"But you seem so surprised. There is nothing to be surprised at, after all, is there?" Every time she pricked him

she stabbed herself; but she wielded the dagger with unsparing hand.

"It's ridiculous," said Mark, "but I don't seem to be able to think." He looked at Jacqueline like a lost child.

Jacqueline steeled herself, forcing her lips to a friendly smile. Oh, she might be cruel; but he was crueler, this boy, crushing out her heart in his strong young hands!

"You see," continued Mark, those clear, blind eyes staring into the smiling face, "I never thought of Priscilla with anyone else but me. I had an idea that we should always just go on playing together." He picked up a small green beetle that was crawling up his arm and put it carefully down in a tangle of dry grass. "It was a ridiculous idea," he said.

"How quickly the dusk falls now," said Jacqueline. "The long summer evenings are getting over. You are right, we entertain wild hopes that we can always keep our friends for ourselves, and some-

one else comes and claims a larger share than we ever had—and it is given gladly." She looked very gentle and very lovely in the soft light, and she stretched out her hand to him suddenly, with a consoling little gesture of camaraderie. "It is fortunate that new friends remain. Shall we be friends, Mr. Spencer?"

"How kind you are!" said Mark, and he took her hand.

Jacqueline wondered whether he could feel it thrilling to the fingertips, that friendly hand. How brown his was—how brown and strong! So this was love, this dreadful force that buffeted her as the autumn winds buffet the fallen leaf, that shook her as the storm shakes the frail aspen—this was love! It was this that she had denied and laughed at and played with—this!

"Mark!" someone called from the other tree. "Oh, Mark, come on! We sha'n't get back now until after Rupert's bedtime."

"Coming," said Mark. He was on his feet almost as he spoke and helping Jacqueline to hers.

She was shaking a little; but her voice was as cool and sweet as ever. "I am horribly untidy," she remarked lightly. "Picnics are disastrous to one's dignity. Oh, I hope that we haven't kept them waiting!"

"I won't forget how good you have been," said Mark simply. "Hello, old fellow! Are they sending you to bed?"

"Yes," admitted Rupert gloomily, "I'd rather go to hell than go to bed."

"Rupert," gasped the outraged Countess, "how dare you? Where do you learn such perfectly dreadful words?"

"In Sunday school," returned the unregenerate Rupert. "I had too—much rather." He scowled portentously at the assembled company, and there was a dangerous light in his eye. "Hell would be exciting, anyway."

"Oh, Aunt Elizabeth!" wailed Cynthia.

Captain Denby gazed tenderly at her shocked little face.

"Come with me this instant!" commanded the Countess of Germaine breathlessly. "This is simply frightful! I am appalled! Mark, are you responsible for this?"

"No, he isn't." Rupert came to the rescue loyally. "Uncle Hal told me about it."

"Told you—told you that hell was exciting?" faltered the Countess, and Cynthia's face crumpled like a rose leaf in her agitation.

"Well, he told me about hell, and it sounded exciting," elucidated Rupert. "Don't pull so, Mother darling: you hurt!"

"That's my machine there," said the Countess. "No, the gray one, Captain Denby. Will you and Cynthia come with us? You too, Jacqueline? Then the others can go with Mark."

"I want to go with Cousin Mark too," entreated Rupert, and his voice was poignant with anxiety. Where Priscilla was, there would he be also. "Oh, please, Mother—please!"

"Certainly not," said the Countess firmly. "Is your maid sufficient chaperon, Miss Hampden? Mark will drop you first, and then take Leonard. Rupert, don't squirm that way!"

"Oh, let him come with us!" begged Mark; but the Countess shook her head.

"He's much too excited. Good-night, dear boy—this has been a real experience."

"Good-night," said Jacqueline to Mark, and her low voice was carefully pitched to reach Priscilla's ears. "I'll see you soon, my friend."

"Oh, very soon," said Mark. "You have been wonderful—I won't forget."

Priscilla stumbled on the step of the automobile and caught herself with a queer little laugh.

"Did you hurt yourself?" asked Charteris quickly. "Let me help you."

"But I'm all right, truly. Oh, Mark, you're trampling all over everything! Those are my very best feet."

"I'm sorry," said Mark absently. "Is everyone ready? Take Miss Hampden home, Boiteau."

"I am afraid you did hurt yourself," Charteris insisted gently. "You are quite white."

"It's nothing," smiled Priscilla, "nothing. I am always pale. You shouldn't call attention to such defects."

Mark looked at her searchingly. It was true, she was quite white. Had Lord Charteris asked the important question, he wondered.

VIII

CÆSAR HOLDS THE STAGE

"MISS HAMPDEN seemed tired," said Charteris. Priscilla had just waved them good-by from the steps and vanished through the open door.

"Yes," acquiesced Mark. He was thinking hard.

"Have a cigarette?" asked Charteris. He had lighted one himself, and its end shone in the darkness like a little scarlet jewel.

"No, thank you, they make me sick."

"Do they, indeed?" said Charteris politely. "I presume they affect any number of people in much the same way; but they prefer being sick unto death to admitting it. It wears off in time, though."

"Everything does, doesn't it?" asked Mark.

Charteris looked at him quickly, and then nodded. "Yes," he assented, "about

everything, I fancy. But I should not have thought that you would have discovered it so quickly. Do you know, I am sorry."

"The trouble is," Mark said slowly, "that I can't understand. I try to do what everyone else does, and the more I do it the easier it is. But I never understand why they do any of these things. Before I came here, I thought that everyone felt the way I did. Then at first I was sure that I was right, and that all the others were wrong. Then—there were so many of them and I was just one—I thought that they must be right. And now I don't know—I don't know!"

"One can be right, and the other millions may be wrong," said Charteris; "but the one is bound to get hurt. From Socrates to Christ it has been the ones who were right who have suffered."

"But they were good," said Mark, "and I'm not—not very. I just do what seems simplest. It's so much easier to tell the truth than to lie, isn't it?"

"It's a debatable point," replied the man, and his mouth twisted. "But some of us would smart considerably if truth were dealt out too liberally. I do not doubt that it is easier to tell it than to hear it."

"I like to hear it, too," said Mark. "It mixes me up so not to, and then I always forget and believe people. Don't you ever believe them?"

"I rarely indulge in unqualified trust: it is too expensive a luxury, I have discovered. But I think that I should believe you."

"Do you think that if I changed people would like me better?" Mark asked with wistful irrelevance. "The people that I like, I mean. Perhaps I could change if I tried."

"I wonder?" said Charteris. "How old were you to-day, Spencer?"

"I was twenty-one," replied Mark.

"When I am with you I feel old—as old as the hills. It's a rare feeling with me, and a remarkably unpleasant one.

I should have guessed you at two thousand years young."

"Why?" asked Mark.

"An April dawn in Athens," mused Charteris, "with the early sun on the Acropolis and a golden-haired youth on the white steps, bending to fasten his sandal. His face is turned away; but if he looked toward me, I fancy it might be —you." He flicked the ashes from his cigarette with a curt little laugh. "I should have felt rather at a loss on the Acropolis, myself."

"I shouldn't," said Mark. "But—have you ever felt homesick?"

"When I was a little lad at school I used to cry myself to sleep at nights, longing for home," returned Charteris. "Sometimes even now I ache for the lights of London town. Well?"

"It sounds awfully silly," it was the old Mark who spoke: the elusive bitterness had quite vanished; "but, do you know, I get awfully homesick for Camelot."

"Camelot?" echoed Charteris.

"Of course I just imagine it; but it seems so real—ever so much realer than this. The towers, and the banners, and the people, and—and everything."

"Camelot would be a good *mise en scène* too," nodded Charteris; "but London——" he shrugged his shoulders whimsically. "I can as easily fancy Hermes strolling down Piccadilly."

"I do feel out of it," confessed Mark, "and it—hurts."

"Does it?" asked the man curiously. "I should have said that you were astonishingly indifferent to all that kind of thing. You have an amazing capacity for joy, I believe."

"Oh, I can't help being happy!" cried Mark. "It's all such fun, you know! Every morning when I wake up the first thing that I think is, 'To-day something wonderful is going to happen to me! To-day I am going to have a glorious adventure!' And when night

comes and I haven't had it, I really don't care. It has been a splendid day, and there is always to-morrow!"

"Ah!" said Charteris. "I had forgotten to-morrow. But there is always yesterday." His face looked a little tired in spite of those brilliant eyes. "On my honor, I believe that Youth has slipped through my fingers while we talked. I could swear that I held her hand an hour ago, and now—— This is the house, I think; yes, he is stopping. Good-night, Spencer. A thousand thanks for a delightful evening!"

"I'll come to the door with you," said Mark.

"Why not come a little farther?" suggested Charteris, searching for his latchkey. "I can give you a Scotch or——"

"No, thank you," replied Mark gravely. "Did—did you ask Priscilla the question, Lord Charteris?"

"Priscilla?" repeated the man. "Oh,

Miss Hampden! My dear fellow, what do you mean? Is it a riddle?"

"Oh!" said Mark blankly. "I thought you knew. Miss Campbell said——" He checked himself suddenly, and when he spoke again his voice was a little uncertain. "It was a question Priscilla wanted you to ask—the most important question that there is." He stood silent for a moment, and then nodded abruptly to Charteris. "I—hope that you will ask her—soon. Good-night."

The man to whom he had spoken remained silent and motionless, his hand still on the lock. He watched Mark run lightly down the steps and spring into the car, watched it start with a subdued whir and speed off silently into the night, and stood watching still after the night had swallowed it. Then he turned the key slowly and stepped into the house. As he crossed the threshold the door slipped from his fingers with a reverberating crash. He gave an involuntary

start, and then an abrupt laugh at his nervousness. Nerves were things with which he had scant patience. A moment's fruitless fumbling for the light wrung from him an exclamation of incredulous annoyance. Actually his fingers were shaking!

Jackson's discreet voice greeted him from the darkness. "The lights won't turn on, Milord. It's that annoying, Milord, with not a lamp in the house. Shall I bring a candle?"

"Certainly. You should have brought them before." It was a relief to his exasperated nerves to inject considerable acrimony into his tone. "This seems to me an unnecessarily inconvenient state of affairs. What is wrong with the lights? Are there no electricians?"

Jackson coughed apologetically. "It's that hard to say, Milord. Me and Ford couldn't get anyone, it being Sunday. We——"

"There, that will do. If you couldn't do anything, you couldn't! Explana-

tions are as superfluous as they are tiresome." His eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. He could dimly see Jackson's lined, anxious face, a white blotch against the yawning blackness of the library door. "Here—take my cane and hat! Be quick with that candle! And—Jackson!" His peremptory tone arrested the hurried retreat of Jackson's obedient feet.

"Yes, Milord."

"Some cognac and a biscuit."

"Yes, Milord."

The swift footfalls died away, and Charteris stood alone again. What had that yellow-haired young pagan said? That Priscilla—that Priscilla—ah, what folly! And yet—was it sheer folly? Her eyes that afternoon when she had listened to him—he could see them now, shining on him through the darkness. They had thrilled him strangely, those shimmering eyes,—clear and sweet and fresh as a child's, while somewhere in their depths lurked and mocked that eternal

sphinx, a woman's soul. Ah, Priscilla, little, fragile, mysterious creature, at once vivid and demure—a white candle, a silver star—light in the darkness, little pale flame! And that flame—it burned for him? A sudden overwhelming tenderness shook him, a longing to shelter the flame, to—— He shivered strongly, his face contracting with a sudden spasm of bitterness. What dreams—what folly—madder than madness itself! The steps were returning; there was a glimmer of light at the end of the corridor; Jackson was there, a candle in each hand.

Charteris moved quickly toward the space darker than the darkness that formed the library door.

"Put them here," he said curtly. "No, on the table. Where is the cognac?"

"Ford is bringing it, Milord."

"Ah, yes. I didn't see him. This infernal darkness—— Neither of you need wait for me. I have a candle and

all that I need here. See that an electrician straightens this out to-morrow."

"Yes, Milord. Good-night, Milord."

"Good-night," nodded Charteris, with a twisted half-smile.

Behind the anxious suavity of Jackson's voice rang Mark's joyous mockery and Rupert's shrill treble. Mark! The smile died suddenly. If he could only remember exactly what the boy had said! Possibly he had misconstrued it, misunderstood—— His face contracted again in his effort to remember. It was something about a question—the most important question — that Priscilla wanted him to ask her. Innocent enough on the surface; but it went deeper than the surface.

At those few simple words of Mark's a violent explosion had taken place, and by its blinding white light he had suddenly seen into their two souls. There was no real doubt in his mind as to what Mark had meant by that question, —it was only that the quiet and the

dark after the blinding flash were terrifying, it was only that he was still a little stunned. Now he must pull himself together, and think like the extremely reasonable and cool individual that Leonard Charteris had been an hour ago.

Attaching the highest and most significant importance to the words that Mark had uttered on the doorstep, what did they come to? Was there anything in them to shake to the foundation that self-complacent soul, that brilliant, selfish mind, that withered and petrified organ that humanity in general was prone to classify as a heart? Was he a lad of twenty, that they should paralyze that dominant mind? What did they come to, those words? A little American heiress wished him to ask her hand in marriage—no more, no less! A strikingly romantic situation, to set his fingers shaking and his eyes burning! Her impossible mother had probably had her strident voice in the matter. One world-worn cynic with as many debts as

he had years, a somewhat tarnished coronet, and a very glittering name for assets, was a rare prize to be captured! He smiled mockingly.

After all, why not? It would be an excellent match—Marian would be delighted. Life was rather dull nowadays; debts lost their pristine charm and glamour; and the little American heiress was decidedly amusing—— He stopped short. It was Priscilla whom he was blaspheming thus—Priscilla! He had forgotten that it was his little white flower, his little white flame, that he was trampling on with his vile feet, defiling with his vile hands. Priscilla could have only one reason for desiring him to ask that question, and that reason was the unheard of, the undreamed of, the miracle of miracles,—she loved him!

For a moment Charteris bowed his head, the debonair and unregenerate head that had been for many years at once the pride and the scandal of London. The head that had held itself so

ruthlessly high under censure and scorn, under pleas and imprecations, bowed suddenly low, humble in his greatest pride. He was unworthy of this white child, true, as unworthy as the veriest villain in the veriest melodrama; but, since she had chosen him, he was more worthy than the saints in Heaven themselves. Now he was very quiet and calmer than he had ever been in his life. The stupor at that first blinding revelation of his love, the fever of excitement that had followed, the savage irony of his recoil,—all had fled, and left him with that peculiar peace, that treacherous lightness of head, mistaken for levelness of head, that is the inevitable sequel to delirium. It all seemed so clear and reasonable, so almost inevitable!

How had Mark known Priscilla's secret? Simplicity itself! He had loved her, as all the world must love her, and when he had told her of his worship her beautiful, fearless candor had led her to tell him her reason for rejecting it. How

had he been blind to it, he who could calculate from the flicker of an eyelash what fires burned within? But how blind he had been to that passion of tenderness that was stored within his own heart! It was all true, as true as it was strange, as strange as it was beautiful. Nothing remained now save to set his house in order and to ask Priscilla that question—the most important question!

He sprang across the dark room with a step as light and sure as any boy's, seized on a small dark wood box and brought it triumphantly back to the friendly light of the candles. His fingers ran lightly over its smooth surface for a minute—hesitated—pressed—the rounded top flew back, and out on the polished table frothed its contents, exhaling a discreetly blended fragrance of orris and sealing wax, infinitely feminine in its faint appeal. The little dark box contained Great Cæsar's conquests. Within it lay the daily payments exacted from Fate, to reimburse him for that

vast theft of long ago. They were more, those dainty, faintly tinted things,—dove gray and soft lavender, dull blue and ivory, with here and there a flaunting, vulgar rosy one,—the wings of broken butterflies and dead moths. They had been the food of his vanity; on them he had sustained his starving soul. Now he had the better food—nectar and ambrosia—the food of the gods!

He smiled faintly, a ghost of his old ironical smile. The situation was so absurdly and acutely theatrical that he could almost see the limelights, hear the violins, smell the paint. Well, his attitude should be far from melodramatic. He laid ruthless hands on the pretty, fragile trifles, sheltering the flame of the candle with one curved palm. How they rustled and protested at its devouring heat! Charteris smiled again grimly as the words stood out, sharp and black for a second, before they vanished forever,—"You swore"—"forgive"—"ever"—"forever"—"always"—"eternally"—

great words traced by little fingers! How surely the grouped exclamation points and the reckless dashes, the lines crossed out and the words underscored, betrayed their feminine origin—more surely even than the faint tints and the fainter odors! The pretty drift was dwindling steadily, the fine pile of gray ashes waxing apace—and Charteris still smiled.

At the bottom of the dark little box lay something wrapped in white paper, as though in a shroud. He lifted it out, holding it toward the flame as he had held the others, only to withdraw it and pull off its sheath with a nervous little gesture. It was a photograph, stained and blurred and faded,—a girl, with a mist of something white about her sloping shoulders and her heavy hair caught up with a great carved comb, in order to show better the exquisite line of her neck. Under straight brows her eyes looked out, long and sweet and sleepy, and the curved, laughing mouth harmo-

nized perfectly with the delicate tilt of her nose. Charteris contemplated it curiously with an abstracted little frown. Were those his tears that had stained it a quarter of a century ago—his kisses that had worn it? Were those the eyes to which he had lifted the incense of his adoration, those the lips to which had risen the prayers of his soul? He stared at the lovely, mocking face intently for a moment, then consigned it steadily to the consuming flame. But he turned his eyes away. He could not watch it burn: so much burned with it!

Not till the flame singed his fingers did he turn and scoop the little pile of soft gray dust into his hand. Where should he put it? Nothing must remain, not even the ashes! His eye lighted on the window and his face cleared. An ivory paper cutter lay on the table, and he picked it up. He would lay these many ghosts by decent burial, so that they might not return to haunt him. The long French window opened on a narrow

balcony. Around its iron edge ran gay flower boxes, still bravely blooming. The rose geraniums were turning a little brown, the marguerites a little yellow—time was when the mignonette and the verbena had filled the still night with stronger fragrance; but in the kind moonlight they seemed passing fair and smelt passing sweet. So thought Charteris, as he turned up the good brown earth with his little ivory trowel and placed his light burden carefully in the hollow, smoothing it over gently. Dust to dust—ashes to ashes! How sweet the mignonette smelled—how white the daisies were in the moonlight! As he turned back to the room, his eye caught for a second his reflection in the mirror. Was it only the moonlight that made his hair so white? He turned away swiftly. No, he was young—he was young! The gray of the ashes, the gray of his hair—he would forget them. The little dark box on the table looked strangely empty. He closed it almost tenderly. Soon, soon,

little box, you would be full again, with small white letters—white wings that would carry him past Heaven itself!

The man stood by the window, over the dead ashes and the living flowers, waiting for the dawn to break. To-morrow! The God of his youth had given him back the great gift of to-morrow! After this silver night, the ruddy dawn, bringing with it his glorious adventure! Outside the moon shone over the roofs of London town, white and tranquil; the mignonette and the verbena censed the still air with their clean, faint fragrance; the marguerites smiled steadfastly up to their little silver friends in the sky. And through the white night the man kept his vigil, remembering only that Love was young, and forgetting that he was old.

IX

ENTER A DOLL

"I OUGHTN'T to have let you come up," said Priscilla; "but I wanted to see you, so I did."

She was clothed in black from head to foot,—not a frail, shimmering black, but a somber little frock of uncompromising severity, relieved only by a low, broad collar and deep cuffs of sheer lawn. The collar was fastened by a small black enamel brooch, and she was twisting nervously in her hands a diminutive white square, edged with black.

"Something has happened?" asked Charteris. "Forgive me, I did not know."

"It isn't anything," explained Priscilla, with a little catch in her breath,—"anything real, I mean. I—I'm just in mourning for myself. It's my unhappy dress. I suppose it's awfully silly?"

"I'm afraid that I don't quite understand," said Charteris gently. "Your unhappy dress?"

"That I wear when I'm very miserable, you know, and dreadfully sorry for myself. You can't think how sorry I am for myself to-day!"

Charteris took a quick step toward her. He would ask her now!

"I can't even cry," Priscilla was saying forlornly. "I can just sit and smother in black butterflies, and watch my doll leaking rivers of sawdust." She laughed up at him suddenly, a little, elfin laugh. "I can't possibly think, Lord Charteris, why I am telling you all this; but then I can't possibly think why I let you come up at all, to see me mourning in sackcloth and ashes over—myself. I think it must have been because it was so good of you to come and play with me when I was lonely. What have you come to play?"

"I have not come to play," said Charteris, and his voice vibrated strangely.

"I have come to ask you the most important question. Priscilla——" But the words died suddenly as though someone had struck them from his lips.

Priscilla's small face had grown whiter than the lawn collar at her throat, and in the terrified, startled eyes lifted to his he read the warrant of many deaths. In the brief minute of silence that followed the executioner did his work. Pride died, Pride who had been so tall and lusty; Hope died too, she with the glad eyes and shining hair; his young Faith, who had grown so sweet and strong in the moonlight; and last of all Youth, golden Youth, whom he had loved so dearly, who he had sworn should live forever. Of all that valiant company there remained only a little, naked, blind, shivering child, with the laughter dead in its throat and the roses dead in its curls—in that brief minute all had died save Love! Charteris put out his hand suddenly and caught at the

mantel. He needed something to hold to, even though it were cold marble.

As for Priscilla, she continued to stare at him with wide, panicstricken eyes, and then, with no warning, she flung herself into the deep armchair, bowed her small black head on her arms, and wept as though her heart would break. At the sound of those great, uncontrollable, gasping sobs Charteris shivered. It was as though a child were weeping,—a terrified, desolate little child. Something must be done—he must try to think! There had been a ghastly mistake. He had frightened her, and she was too little to be frightened. He must lie—he must think quickly! But how could he think while she cried like that? Each sob stabbed through his head like a little shooting pain.

"Don't!" begged Charteris. "Oh, don't!"

At his strange voice the little crumpled black figure in the chair wept more bitterly than before, so that each sob

wrenched and shook her from head to foot. And Charteris, for the first time since he had cursed his God in the bitterness of his youth, prayed. He prayed that God might help him to make Priscilla stop crying. When he spoke again his voice was quite natural.

"My dear child, you really mustn't cry like that. Are you tired? Ill? Had you rather that I went away, perhaps? My question was one that will keep quite well till another time."

The sobs grew quieter. Priscilla was listening.

"Or, perhaps, if we talk things over quietly, they will straighten out a little. You must pretend that I am your father —or a very elderly brother might be better; at any rate one who desires most earnestly to help you."

The sobs had quite ceased. "What—what was the question?" came a small, muffled voice out of the depths.

"It was of merely relative importance," replied Charteris slowly. "I

wanted to ask you if you were going to Elizabeth's house party for young Spencer next Saturday; and if you wouldn't take a place in my motor if you were." The little blind Love shivered and cringed; but Charteris' voice was steady.

"Oh!" said Priscilla faintly. "Oh!" And she sat up suddenly, very straight indeed, and stared at Charteris with eyes gleaming with amazement behind their veil of tears. "I—I am sorry." Her voice shook, in spite of her efforts to control it. "You see, I have been crying so dreadfully hard inside of me that it was bound to come through sometime. And I thought—ah, I don't know what I thought! But it was disgraceful of me. Are—are you going to scold me?"

Charteris locked his hands behind him, so that he would not take the little figure poised on the edge of the chair into his arms, and kiss away the tears from the curling lashes, and the tremor from the curling lips, and the pallor from the small, tear-drenched face.

"No," he denied tranquilly, "I am not going to scold you. You would be rather a difficult person to scold. And —I am very sorry, you know. Can't I help?"

"Nobody can help," whispered Priscilla. "Nobody, nobody!" Then she caught her breath with another of those valiant smiles. "Oh, poor thing, I frightened you badly, didn't I? But you frightened me too, you see. I thought— oh, dreadful thoughts!" She pushed them from her with two expressive small hands. "Will you really be my brother —my really truly brother? That would be my dreams. I have always been so lonely!" The rebellious mouth quivered; but was speedily brought into subjection. "You did mean it, didn't you? You weren't just trying to make me stop crying?"

"No," said the man. "I did mean it."

"Ah, how beautiful!" cried Priscilla joyously. "I am glad that I put on my

mourning frock—I am glad that I cried —I am glad that I was so wicked and so silly! Do you hear, I am glad?"

"Are you so glad?" asked Charteris.

"So glad!" nodded Priscilla. "Because, you see, just now I am lonelier than ever, and I want terribly to have people like me, and you wouldn't pretend that you were my brother if you didn't like me a great deal, would you?"

"No," said Charteris, "no!"

"May I call you Cæsar?" asked Priscilla demurely. "I would feel comfortabler if I could call you Cæsar."

"As your brother, I think I may sanction your calling me Cæsar."

"*Dear* Cæsar!" laughed Priscilla audaciously. "Oh, I love you for liking me when I was so lonely!" She sprang up suddenly, her small face flushed and brilliant, her eyes burning feverishly, her hands twisting nervously at the black-bordered handkerchief. "It's very hot in here, isn't it? Oh, here's Job."

"Job?"

"My unhappy doll." She thrust it at him, laughing a little excitedly. "You see, all the sawdust has leaked out of her, poor thing, and she's dressed in black too. I tell her everything, and she stands it beautifully. She's much more patient than Job, really."

Charteris looked at the stolid pink and white face, and flaxen curls, and the blue china eyes, and for a minute the old, sardonic smile flitted across his face.

"She looks as stupid as most patient people," he remarked as he handed her back.

"Yes," said Priscilla; but she clasped the maligned Job to her heart. "Only it is much better when you can tell someone else how sorry you are for yourself, even if she is stupid."

Charteris looked down at the somber little figure with the child's face and the yellow-haired doll in her arms, and his heart sickened. How young she was—how divinely, pathetically young!

"Suppose you tell me," he said.

"I can't," replied Priscilla, and her voice was so low that he could hardly hear it. "Not even you—not anyone!" Then she looked up at him bravely. "Suppose you had had a dream, Cæsar, —just suppose, you know,—and it was so beautiful that at first you knew that it couldn't be anything but a dream. You remembered that only dreams were like that. Only every minute it grew more real and more true and more beautiful, that dream, until you forgot to remember anything at all except how happy you were. And then, just when it seemed most real and most true and most beautiful—you woke up, Cæsar! And everything in the world seemed gray and cold and ugly after the warm, lovely dream! Then what would you do, Cæsar —after you had wakened up? What would you do then?"

Charteris stood silent for a moment, literally fighting for breath. His beautiful dream—his beautiful dream! "I

think I should dream again," he told her lightly.

"Ah, but you can't!" said Priscilla wistfully. "It never comes back, the dream. Didn't you know?"

"There are other dreams," said the man, "and youth sleeps sound, little Sister, and dreams sweet. There are some who can sleep no longer, who toss through the weary night, weeping and imploring and crying for one minute's sleep and for one little dream, who lose consciousness only to drift into nightmare, and regain it only to long for even nightmare again, who pray for the eternal sleep in an eternal night. But you are not one of those, little Sister. So close your eyes, and dream!"

"Is there an eternal sleep in an eternal night?" asked Priscilla, and her voice was the voice of a little child afraid of the dark.

"I fear not," said Charteris. "We shall probably all meet for afternoon tea

by the rivers of milk and honey in quite the old way, and tell each other pleasant fibs as to how becoming golden crowns are to our particular style of beauty, and how we simply adore the harp, and how we never had thought much of the world anyhow and infinitely prefer eternity and the simple life. As it was in the beginning——"

"I suppose that even the lady cave dwellers had their days at home," said Priscilla, and her eyes danced. "Very informal, of course, and their visiting list must have been badly curtailed owing to their husbands' unfortunately murderous propensities. But how could humanity survive without the mystic rites of afternoon tea? Would you like some now?"

"No," said Charteris, "I think not." If he could laugh for just five minutes more—just five little minutes—it would be all right! Then he could go. "Are you going to adorn my motor on Saturday?"

"Of course! I should love to. Who is going to the party?"

"Spencer's Cousin Cynthia, and the amiable Denby, and a raven-haired youth who has just been graduated from Cambridge, and has poetic aspirations and a muscular build," enumerated Charteris, "and my sister Marian, and the Gordons, and Jacqueline Campbell."

"I remember—I really knew all the time," assented Priscilla. "Miss Campbell said——"

Something snapped in Charteris' head, and he laughed suddenly. Of course it was all absurdly simple. He could hear Mark's voice from the darkness, saying, "Oh, I thought you knew. Miss Campbell said——"

"Well?" he queried smoothly. "Miss Campbell said——"

"She said that it was such a delightful combination," concluded Priscilla. "But why did you laugh?"

"Something suddenly struck me as very absurd. May I smoke? Thanks."

"Is Miss Campbell a great friend of yours?" asked Priscilla.

Charteris laughed softly again. "We have known each other over a very extensive period," he replied.

"She is very, very clever, isn't she?" asked Priscilla earnestly.

"Very, very clever," acquiesced Charteris pleasantly. "But sometimes she does silly things. And a clever woman doing silly things is one of the most diverting and heartrending spectacles under the sun."

"I think that I'm—tired," said Priscilla, in a small, desolate voice, "I think that I'm—very tired."

Charteris rose. "You're sending me away again," he said. "Are you so tired, little Sister? Then you must sleep. I wish you—pleasant dreams."

"Say good-by to Job," commanded Priscilla, and the drooping mouth curved with a sudden smile as she held out the battered, simpering patriarch to Charteris.

But he took a sudden step backward, catching at the mantel again. "No!" he cried fiercely, "no!" He could stand death itself; but this he would not stand, —this waxen, grinning puppet making a farce of all his suffering,—and then at sight of Priscilla's blank, frightened face, he touched its flaxen curls with gentle fingers.

"Poor Job!" he said, and the doll mocked back at him with glassy blue eyes. "I have forgotten what courtesy is due you. It—it has been some time since I have played with dolls."

And as he went blindly through the hall Priscilla's laughter echoed after him, —a child's laughter at his clumsiness.

X

A TRITE SITUATION

CHARTERIS too was standing in the little green room that looked so large, as, not so very long ago, young Gilleon had stood. He was staring down at the tinted, waxen lady; but instead of the sleepy, shallow, inscrutable eyes, he saw a pair of wide, frightened ones, in whose shimmer of tears bright To-morrow lay drowned and dead; and at the sound of Jacqueline's voice on the stairs his own eyes were not good to see.

"Bring up the tea at once," the voice was saying, "and I'm not at home to anyone." The curtains parted swiftly, there was a tap of light heels, a rustle of light draperies, a fugitive fragrance in the air. But Charteris did not turn: he stood still, staring at dead To-morrow.

"Ah, Leonard, how nice of you!" cried Jacqueline in that silken, sweet

voice, and he turned slowly. "I have kept you waiting, too; but it isn't even remotely my fault, as I have just come in. See, I didn't even wait to take off my hat!" She was extracting the jeweled pins with skillful fingers as she spoke, her back to him, consulting the mirror. "There! Well, have you managed to amuse yourself?"

"Excellently," replied Charteris. "Excellently, thank you, Jacqueline."

Jacqueline gave the bright mass that so discreetly crowned her little head a final touch, nodded happily at the face in the mirror, and turned to Charteris. "Here's tea," she announced. "Take the little round chair,—it's much the more comfortable one,—and pull it up so. Then we can have a delightful chat."

"Delightful!" echoed Charteris politely, and he pulled up the chair.

"It is the most exquisite day," said Jacqueline, her light, sure hands hovering over the tea things.

Charteris looked at her with bitter curiosity. It was rather absurd that this slight, girlish creature, with the pretty pink flush in her cheeks and the happy light in her clear eyes, with the knot of spring violets caught in the laces of her gown and the sweet, low voice,—it was rather absurd that she should be the infamous creature that he knew her to be.

"Like spring, you know," continued Jacqueline. "I have been hearing birds and smelling flowers all afternoon."

"Indeed! It is a trifle late for either. Where have you been this afternoon?"

"At Elizabeth's. It was just a few people. The atmosphere was fairly surcharged with informality."

"Was young Spencer there?" asked Charteris.

"Your acumen is positively startling, Cæsar. He was, he was! Lisa adores him, and his violent affection for Rupert leads him to be an almost permanent adornment to their mansion. Will you

be particularly diabolical and have some rum in your tea?"

"No, thanks. Spencer is the *Ultima Thule* of matrimonial ambition just at present, isn't he—the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? How lucky that he's at the end of a rainbow, instead of a long dusty hill!"

"Leonard, your distressingly symbolic manner of talking is growing on you. Instead of a habit, it has become a vice. On the whole, I think that a rainbow is rather less satisfactory than even a dusty hill. Cream and no sugar?"

"Thanks. I meant how lucky for him," explained Charteris pleasantly. "There are a thousand who climb the dusty hill of flirtation to the one who ventures on the frail rainbow of dreams. The remarkable thing is that some people think that the rainbow ends right over the hill."

"There is a distinctly feline streak in your nature, Cæsar," laughed Jacqueline. "For that remark I have put two lumps

of sugar in your tea. I suppose that you have been hearing tales of Mark's devotion to me?"

"No," replied Charteris reflectively, "I can't say that I have. Ah, well—if there's any truth in those tales, it will be hard for him, poor boy!"

Jacqueline looked up swiftly, and for the first time she saw Charteris's eyes. Then she put down her cup of tea very carefully. "Hard?" she repeated. "Hard? What do you mean?"

"Why did you lie to Spencer about Miss Hampden?" asked Charteris conversationally.

"Don't be rude, Cæsar," cautioned Jacqueline. "And, above all, don't be absurd! I lied to Mark about the little American?"

"You told Spencer that Miss Hampden was in love with me. It was a silly thing to do, my dear. Why did you do it?"

"My good man!" replied Jacqueline, and she laughed delightfully. "What

on earth are you talking about? At any rate, it's refreshingly absurd."

"Ah," said Charteris, "I see that there has been a mistake. You must forgive my stupidity."

"*Absolvo te!*" pronounced Jacqueline graciously. "You goose! Oh, must you go?"

"Unfortunately, I must. I have to straighten out that mistake with young Spencer."

"Wait!" exclaimed Jacqueline, and she clasped her hands in her lap till the knuckles whitened. "I think that I have a glimmer. I remember now that Mark was interested out of all proportion by something that I said yesterday. But it's too ridiculous! Was it something about a question?"

"A very important question," prompted Charteris helpfully.

"Then I have it!" she cried triumphantly, and the laughter rippled again. "Who in Heaven's name could have foreseen such complications?"

"Who indeed?" agreed Charteris affably.

"The important question was about those theatricals that you were planning which you wanted her for. I told Mark that I had left you together so you could ask her, and the poor child thought—— Oh, no, how delicious!" The laughter pealed out again, and Charteris smiled appreciatively.

"It has its comic elements," he conceded. "The explanation will undoubtedly cause him a pleasant surprise."

Jacqueline nodded brightly. "I'll tell him at once," she said; "because it might be embarrassing, mightn't it?"

"True, it might. I shall take pleasure in straightening it out this evening."

"There's no earthly need for you to take all that trouble," Jacqueline informed him considerately. "I'll see him to-morrow; so it will be quite all right."

"No trouble at all," Charteris deprecated. "I'll see you to-morrow at Marian's, won't I? Then good-by."

There was a hunted look in Jacqueline's eyes as she rose; but the eyes were lowered and her movements were as studied in their careless grace as ever.

"You said that you would be at Marian's to-morrow?" she queried. "Then just wait a second till I write a line to give her some addresses that I promised."

Charteris bowed, with an ironical little smile. "I'll send one to Mark too, while I'm about it," she murmured abstractedly over the swift scratching of her pen. "It will save you the trouble of a rather embarrassing explanation."

"You are kindness itself," he assured her; "but it's quite unnecessary. I have any number of other things to explain to him."

"Other things?" queried Jacqueline. "What kind of things?"

"Merely an old-fashioned dissertation on the edifying sight of lovely woman stooping to folly—incidentally stooping to conquer. I may add that I shall em-

ploy you, my dear Jack, to point the moral and to adorn the tale."

Jacqueline blotted the note paper with great precision, folded it, and put it into an envelope. Then she spoke. "Are you trying to be impertinent, Cæsar?"

"My dear Jack!" he protested gallantly.

"What are you going to tell Mark?"

"I am going to tell him about young Gilleon," smiled Cæsar, "and old Duncairne, and Captain Mawyn, and Louis Dethero, and the Russian attaché." He leaned toward her suddenly, with a savage little laugh. "I am going to tell him what I have told no one for more years than I care to think—I am going to tell him the truth! You hear—the truth!"

"No!" said Jacqueline, and her scarlet lips were as stiff and white as paper. "No, you can't! You are a devil from hell, Leonard; but you are a gentleman!"

Charteris laughed again. "Your un-

conscious humor is refreshing, Jacqueline. But you are deceiving yourself and flattering me. I am not even a gentleman. I am feeling quite shockingly primitive, and I am thirsting for the blood of what you are pleased to call your heart. Come, come, my dear—you have drained enough hearts in your time; there is not the slightest necessity for that tragic mask."

"He will not believe you! You have no proofs!" said Jacqueline; but her eyes were black with terror.

"Ah, there you underrate me. You forget that poor Louis was a friend of mine, and once or twice, when you twisted the screws a little more than usual, he vented his sufferings on paper. I have the paper."

"Cæsar," asked Jacqueline, and she rose and stood before him, "what would you do if I told you that I loved him?".

"I should laugh," said Charteris; "but I should admire your ingenuity."

"Then laugh," said Jacqueline, and she closed her eyes. "I love him!"

But Charteris did not laugh, and for a minute his contempt shook the inflexible smoothness of his voice. "You pollute those words," he said. "Do you term your infamous ambition love?"

"It is no infamous ambition!" cried Jacqueline fiercely. "It is laughter and sunlight and truth and beauty and youth, and though I drag myself through the mire to reach it, I will have it! It is love, and no one ever told me—no one ever told me!"

"The blood of Messalina and all the Borgias runs in your veins," said Charteris. "Who are you to claim love?"

"Who are you to deny it me?" demanded Jacqueline passionately. "You and your like have made me what I am. I am the work of your hands."

"Mine?" replied Charteris, and he laughed.

"You have broken my soul," stormed Jacqueline, "as surely as poison shatters

the Venice glass. When I came to London from the convent you and your friends undertook my education. You taught me that all your vile world demanded of a woman was that she should be well gowned and well groomed, that she should speak evil loudly and commit it quietly. You taught me that modesty had gone out with crinolines, chivalry with armor, truth with the Roman togas. You taught me that the sole duty of woman was to be amusing and to be amused. You taught me to be what I am!"

"You proved an apt pupil," returned Charteris smoothly. "We gave you your diploma at a tender age."

"But who taught me of love?" cried Jacqueline. "Oh, not one—not any one of you, who had taught me so many things! I never knew—I never knew! I thought that the vile trash that they gave was love: they said it was. How should I have known? Should I have known?"

"Jacqueline, I consider this tirade profitless. It is well done; but you are leaving one thing out of consideration. You forget that I know you."

"Know me!" flamed Jacqueline. "You who stand there sneering, you think that you know me? You are one of those who pushed me from the stars of my innocence and faith into hell itself, and then wonder that something was broken in the fall. But you fell with me, Leonard! And now you think, when I would climb back all the long way to a star that shines even brighter than those bright stars from which I fell, that you can bar the way? You! Now listen! You say that you know me. I swear that I will trample over you and any other who stands in my way—that I will wade through blood and pass through fire—that I will move mountains and dry up seas—but I will get to my star!"

"Then there will be a fallen star," said Charteris,—"the star of the morn-

ing, Jacqueline, that you would drag down to your level to burn in hell. But you shall not drag it!"

"No," cried Jacqueline triumphantly, "it will light me to Heaven!"

"You are waxing quite lyric. Is that all? Because I really must go."

"You shall not go!" said Jacqueline. "You shall stay, and you shall believe me! I will cry it till I deafen you—I love him, I love him, I love him! Do you hear? I love him!"

"I fancy you overrate your affection," remarked Charteris politely.

The fierce white light died suddenly in Jacqueline's face, as though a candle had been blown out. She stood staring curiously at her hands which she had stretched out toward Charteris, and then she let them fall.

"You mean it? You are going to tell him?" she asked tonelessly.

"Exactly. I mean it, and I am going to tell him."

"Let me," she said, and the words

cracked and fluttered on her lips. "Let me. Give me a little time."

"You would waste the time, Jack, and you would not tell him."

"I will tell him everything. Only, if I explained, he might understand, he might be sorry. Ah, Cæsar!"

"To what end, Jack?"

"He might have loved me, Cæsar. He said that I helped him. He—he gave me those violets. Look, Cæsar—the violets!"

"They are dead," replied Charteris. "Do you remember that you wore mauve all one year, because Louis sent you so many violets? God keep Spencer from your help, Jack!"

"Just a week!" begged Jacqueline. "Just a week! It can't hurt you—a little week! Cæsar, you did not always laugh so terribly. I beg of you in love's name, one week!"

"And I refuse it, in love's name," replied Charteris.

"God will punish you," said Jacque-

line, and she stood aside to let him pass. "Why do you not go?"

"In love's name, I refuse it," repeated Charteris; "but I grant it in my own. The gods have diverted themselves with me long enough. I claim a little amusement for myself. You are going to Maiden's Court for Elizabeth's week-end this Saturday."

Jacqueline nodded mutely; her eyes were searching his face with desperate hope.

"Good! I give you till four o'clock on Sunday. It will entertain me vastly to watch your maneuvering, and I—I am rather in need of entertainment. Wait a minute! There is no need to thank me just yet. In return for this respite, I ask something of you."

"I have given many things to many men," said Jacqueline. "To you only I give my gratitude. What more do you wish?"

"Merely a slight guaranty. You may

send a line to Mark, after all. Write as I dictate."

Jacqueline sat down before the pretty little escritoire, drawing a sheet of paper toward her. "I am ready. Well?"

"'All that Lord Charteris tells you of me is true; but of half my infamies he is ignorant,'" dictated Charteris. "Have you written it? 'All my life I have sacrificed to Mammon: this time I have been forced to sacrifice myself instead of you.' You have that too? Then your signature is all that is necessary."

Jacqueline signed her name and waited.

"Simply address an envelope. There is nothing more."

She addressed the envelope in her firm, delicate hand, adding in the corner, "Courtesy of Lord Charteris." Then she slipped the sheet of paper into it, sealed it, and handed it to Charteris.

"Thanks," he said, putting it into his pocket. "That is all, I think. If I find from Spencer on Sunday afternoon that you have not fulfilled your part of the

contract, this will simplify matters. Do you still think that I am a gentleman, Jacqueline?"

"No," she replied, "I know that you are a beast."

"The tiger playing with his victim before he slays it, eh? I wonder?" He looked at her, and then made a sudden hopeless little gesture of finality. "If I told you that in forcing you to this I lose as much as you, Jacqueline, what would you say?"

"I would laugh," said she, and looked back at him implacably with somber eyes.

"Ah," replied Charteris, "you too? You are right, my dear. I am a beast crueler than the most beastly; a devil more relentless than the most devilish; I am Yesterday, whom you had forgotten, come back to claim his own."

Jacqueline only stared at him with those great, tragic eyes.

"We have no traffic with To-morrow, you and I," said Charteris. "We belong

to the night. The dawn is not for us. The morning stars shall sing together."

"Are you going?" asked Jacqueline sweetly.

"Yes," nodded Charteris, "I am going. And the note for Marian?"

"It was of no importance," she replied. "Give her my love, and tell her that I will see her to-morrow."

"Then good-by. *Sans rancune,* mine enemy?"

"I am afraid that we have both been rather ridiculous," she said, with a brilliant little smile, "and I object to being ridiculous. On the whole, though—*sans rancune, mon ami.*"

Long after he had gone, Jacqueline stood motionless in the center of the little green room. When she looked up finally her eyes fell on the mirror, and she sprang back with a strangled little scream. But it was only her own face that she had seen.

XI

CÆSAR PROMPTS

It was very pleasant on the terrace in the starlight, warm enough to dispense with wraps more cumbersome than scarfs, cool enough to find the air on flushed cheeks a conscious delight. No one talked much. It was good to rest a little after the arduous chatting at dinner; so they let their thoughts stray, and lent a casual ear to the piano. There was no sound save the subdued tinkling of coffee spoons, an occasional half finished sentence, completed by a subdued laugh, a tentative sigh, the sudden whisper of a woman's dress, and, from the house, the piano. It was as though it were singing to itself, the piano, dreaming through little wistful happy catches from Chopin and Schubert and Schumann,—flowers of sound, articulate moonlight.

And, oddly touched but lightly scorn-

ful as was its wont, the group on the terrace dreamed too. There was nothing to mark them at first in the darkness save their cigarettes, which hung poised in mid-air like a whole constellation of small, fiery Mars, ever and anon whirling suddenly off into space; but gradually there stood out frail wreaths of mist that were the women, strong blotches of white that were the men. The music stopped abruptly, snapping the disdainful dreams like flowers from their stalks, and one of the long French windows was thrown open.

"Are you on the terrace?" came Jacqueline's sweet voice. "Is all the coffee gone? Have you chairs for us?"

"All the questions are answered in the affirmative," returned a man's voice from the group. "What a chatterbox you are, Jacqueline! I suppose that you are coming down here to spoil it all, and make night hideous with your prattle."

"There are one—two—three steps,"

counted Jacqueline. "No, look out, Mark, there are four."

"I know it," retorted Mark bitterly. "Having just walked off into space and hit the top of my head with my chin, and bitten a piece out of my tongue, and jarred my spinal column in a shockingly dangerous manner, I am qualified to state that there are four steps. But it was hateful of you to mislead me."

"Heavens, hear them!" groaned the man who had spoken before. "And they'll keep it up all night: they love it. Can't anybody stop them? Can't anybody make them go away? Can't anybody do anything?"

"You can stop making such a noise," replied the unfeeling Jacqueline. "You're waking the very echoes with your lamentations. On the whole, I think that you are the most annoying man in England, Arthur."

"That's just what Isabel says," exclaimed Arthur Gordon excitedly. "Only she doesn't stop at England. Do you,

Isabel? Jove! that's an interesting coincidence!"

"Isabel never stops at anything," said Jacqueline charmingly.

"Oh, yes, Dear," came Isabel's soft, pretty voice from the darkness, "I am not blessed with your reckless courage. And then——"

"Don't fight," implored Arthur frantically. "Oh, please don't fight! Isabel had rather fight than go to Heaven; but it's wicked to encourage her."

"Don't be so idiotic, Arthur!" commanded Jacqueline severely. "You are too absurd! I shudder to think what opinion people must have of you who haven't known you from your extremely trying infancy up. It is simply——"

Here Arthur burst into muffled sobs, and refused to be consoled until Jacqueline retracted her highly veracious statements.

"He repels me," said the athletic and poetic youth in a low voice to Priscilla. "The whole atmosphere repels me. In

this group of human souls, where is Beauty? Where is Truth? Where is Aspiration? Where is that crowning treasure, Anguish? Where are the pulse and the passion and the poetry of life?"

"I think that you are being rather silly," remarked Priscilla impartially. "I don't see why you came to Maiden's Court for a week-end if you were looking for the pulse and passion and poetry of life. Did you like the fillet of sole at dinner?"

"The—what?" came the outraged tones.

"The fillet of sole."

"One of us is mad," replied the poet. "The fillet of sole was excellent."

"I thought so too," agreed Priscilla. "But where were the Beauty and the Truth and the Aspiration in that sole? I don't speak of the crowning treasure of Anguish. It was a good sole too."

"It was," agreed the poet, and the emotion had gone from his voice. "Well?"

"If we should only take what we find in this world, and not persist in looking for attributes that exist only in our imagination, it would be happier for all of us," said Priscilla. "You might just as well have looked for the pulse and passion and poetry of life in the fillet of sole as in these people: it would have been quite as reasonable."

"In your heart you despise them as I do," murmured the poet.

"I don't despise them at all," denied Priscilla emphatically. "I adore them. They're amusing and clever and attractive to look at, and nice to me—what more do I want?"

"Is that all you want?" asked the poet.

"It's all that I want from them. I take what they give me gladly, and turn elsewhere for my other needs."

"You're the first sensible person that I've listened to since I can remember," said the poet, and his voice was most cordially matter of fact. "Heavens! what

a relief! Who are you, anyway? So far I have merely referred to you vaguely as a kindred soul."

"Don't do it again," laughed Priscilla. "There are no such things as kindred souls. My name is Priscilla Hampden, and it was very rude of you not to know it."

"It's a nice name," said the poet. "Mine is John Evelyn Fordyth Allingham."

"It's a very exciting appellation," commented Priscilla.

"But I am more generally referred to as Binkie."

"Why Binkie?" inquired Priscilla.

"Why not? Binkie has a certain subtle charm."

"It doesn't seem to go with the pulse and poetry and passion of life," suggested Priscilla mildly.

"Oh, well, neither do I, for the matter of that. But everybody rowed me so about my general inappropriateness, that I thought I'd be really artistic for awhile.

None of these people knew me before except Cousin Lisa; so it worked beautifully."

"Do you really write poetry?" asked Priscilla, and she laughed.

"I write beautiful poetry," retorted John Evelyn Fordyth Allingham hotly; "the best poetry that I ever read, by far. Do you mean to say that you haven't read it?"

Priscilla laughed again. "Since you recommend it so emphatically, I shall reform. You are really as silly as any of them, aren't you, Mr. Allingham?"

"Sillier," he agreed; "because they aren't really silly, poor things: they just pretend to be. It must be ghastly to have to pretend to be silly!"

"You are right," said Isabel Gordon's soft voice suddenly. "We just pretend. We who are no longer children have not put away childish things. We play hide and go seek with our hearts and puss in the corner with our souls; we dance singing over London Bridge every day, never

heeding its tottering foundations; we pick our toys to pieces or smash them with careless hands, and then fall a-weeping because they will no longer go."

"One can always get new toys," suggested Jacqueline lightly. "Are you denying us our games, Isabel?"

"There's one that we all play," said Charteris from the darkness. "Blind man's buff, *messieurs et dames!* It's the only one we play in earnest, I fancy. Every last one of us, groping, groping with bandaged eyes and outstretched hands, reaching for the unattainable! It brushes us—it whispers in our ear—we stretch out eager hands—and it is not there!"

"You think that we never grasp it, then?" demanded the poet.

"Who are we with our halting steps and darkened eyes," said Charteris, "who are we to reach that beautiful, shining thing, burnished of head and winged of heel, alluring, mocking, ever

near enough to touch us, ever far enough to elude us?"

Isabel yawned and tossed her cigarette into space. "More fools we for trying to attain the unattainable," she said sweetly. "It's a stupid game, eh, Cæsar?"

"It has its good minutes," meditated Charteris. "There are breathless seconds when we stumble on one of our comrades and hold him fast, dreaming between heartbeats that it is the Unattainable itself that we have in our hands."

"And then we lift the bandage," said Isabel slowly. After a minute she shrugged her shoulders and lit another cigarette. "Oh, *la belle affaire!* You're a ghastly pessimist, Leonard! Don't you believe in anything?"

"Not much," said Charteris amiably. "Do you?"

"I believe in belief," replied Isabel. "What do you believe in, Jacqueline?"

"I believe in my star," answered Jacqueline.

"And you, Mr. Allingham?"

"I believe in myself," replied the modest Binkie with conviction, and Priscilla laughed.

"Lucky you!" said Isabel. "What do you believe in, Mr. Spencer?"

"I don't know," replied Mark. "But I think that I believe in everything."

"Only that?" marveled Isabel. "What do you believe in, Arthur?"

"I believe that you are a goose," replied Arthur promptly. "What I hate about Charteris is that he wants to make everybody else stop believing in things too. I think that it's so silly not to believe in things!"

"Cæsar is one of those accursed individuals who don't believe in tales of fairies, or tales of love, or tales of adventure," remarked Jacqueline carelessly. "I think that the only things he does believe in are mathematics and Nemesis."

"I don't believe in mathematics for a second," replied Charteris. "I think it absurdly presumptuous to state that two

and two make four. How do we know that they don't make seventy-nine? They might just as well."

"And Nemesis?" queried Jacqueline.

"Ah, there I am like Madame de Staël and her ghosts. I don't believe in Nemesis; but I fear it. As for fairy tales, I believe in them for the young of heart—in tales of love for the pure of heart—in tales of adventure for the strong of heart. Not to press the point, my dear Jack, I fear that we should find them sealed books. It would do us small good to break the seals and pry them open: we should find them written in an unknown tongue."

"I want an adventure," lamented Arthur Gordon. "Never in my life have I had an adventure. I've had everything in the world, from measles to Isabel; but I've never had even a little bit of an adventure, and I believe in them, and I'm strong of heart."

"An inspiration!" announced Charteris. "We'll all go adventure seeking

to-morrow! We'll hunt in pairs, and take our luncheon, and all report progress at four o'clock sharp. Lisa wanted an idea—can anyone suggest a better?"

"Ah!" said Arthur in breathless rapture. "That was a spark of the divine fire! But I won't hunt with Isabel, because romance is dead within me. Do we draw lots?"

"I think we shall go in the order of our years," replied Charteris. "Let's see, that means that Miss Hampden and Spencer lead off. Then——"

"There's Rupert," murmured Jacqueline abstractedly. "He'll be so disappointed, poor mite!"

"Rupert is going with me," said Charteris. "We've had a pressing engagement for to-morrow for some time. Then you and Arthur, Jack, and Isabel and Mr. Allingham, and Miss Kent and Captain Denby."

"Where have they been all evening?" asked Isabel.

"Miss Kent is teaching Captain Den-

by to play chess," replied Charteris gravely. "It's a good game, chess. Well, is it decided?"

"What becomes of Lisa?" queried Jacqueline.

"Oh, she won't go, because she wears such high heels and can't abide scenery. She told me once that she found nothing in her extremely exigent existence so fatiguing as nature."

"Poor Lisa!" laughed Isabel. "Where is she now?"

"She's reading to Rupert," answered Jacqueline. "She does every night, for hours. First 'The Three Musketeers,' and then 'Twenty Years After,' and then 'The Vicomte de Bragelonne.' She's halfway through the fourth volume of the Vicomte now, for the third time."

"Doesn't she ever read anything else?" demanded Priscilla in horror-stricken tones.

"I don't think so: Rupert won't listen to anything else. He told her yesterday that he thought Thackeray was an island

and Keats was an animal, and Lisa cried for hours."

"There is something holy about that kind of ignorance," remarked Charteris meditatively. "One hesitates to disturb it. But it is sheer fiendishness on Rupert's part to assume it, because I'll warrant a goodly amount that he is acquainted with the precise nature of those two obscure gentlemen. I shall speak to him severely to-morrow."

"Children read everything nowadays," said Jacqueline. "And no one has the slightest objection to calling a spade a spade before them."

"Why should they?" asked Isabel serenely. "I consider calling a spade a spade a highly commendable performance; except that I never could see why a harmless, necessary spade should be used as a symbol for the objectionable."

"No," agreed Charteris. "If we said call dirt dirt, or spiders spiders, or poison poison, it would have considerably more force. And it would have more force

still if we taught that dirt soiled and spiders bit and poison killed."

"Instead of which," said Jacqueline, "being in a high state of civilization, we impart the salient information that dirt gives an artistic patina, that spiders are charming household pets, and that poison is a pleasing stimulant. It's so much more refined!"

"Is Jacqueline still talking?" asked Arthur plaintively. "Do you suppose that she will talk all to-morrow? Angels and ministers of grace defend us! In case anybody is interested in the fact, I shall state that I am sleepy; also that I am going to bed."

"What a brilliant idea!" said Jacqueline admiringly. "Let's all go to bed! Adventure seekers need a good night's rest."

"May you find the great adventure to-morrow, little Sister!" said Charteris to Priscilla, under cover of the confusion of laughter and chatter as they trooped toward the house.

"Oh!" exclaimed Priscilla, and even in the darkness Charteris fancied that he could see the flame of color that suddenly swept her face. "Oh, Cæsar! Did—did you know all the time?"

"Not quite all the time," he told her gently.

"Dear Cæsar! Did you do it on purpose?"

"Very much indeed on purpose," assented Charteris. "All good luck, my little Sister! Good-night!"

He stood aside to let her pass through the French window, then turned in reply to the light touch on his arm.

"You couldn't take me instead of Rupert to-morrow, Cæsar?" asked Isabel Gordon softly.

"I'm afraid not, Bellina."

"Bellina!" laughed Isabel bitterly, and she stood so that the light fell full on her ugly delicate face. "Your sense of humor always was a bit brutal, Cæsar. Is that all that you have to say to me?"

"Quite all. Run away now like a good little girl."

"The lifted bandage," said Isabel softly. "*Eh bien!* Good-night."

"You cheated, Cæsar!" murmured Jacqueline as she passed. Her scarf caught in one of the vines, and he bent to disentangle it.

"On the theory of set a thief to catch a thief," he rejoined pleasantly. "You've been cheating too, Jack."

They stood confronting each other for a moment, and then from within came a sudden excited little laugh.

"I take your pawn," announced Cousin Cynthia happily.

There was a second's pause, and then "Checkmate!" said a stolid voice.

"Are you looking for symbols, Jack?" asked Charteris.

"No; but I am having them thrust upon me," returned Jacqueline, and she laughed brilliantly into his face. "Ah, well—the game isn't over yet! Good-night, Leonard."

Charteris stood motionless for a second, staring after her. Then he shrugged his shoulders and strolled slowly back toward the terrace, lighting another cigarette.

XII

MARK MISSES HIS CUE

"Is this your idea of an adventure?" demanded Priscilla indignantly, when she could get her breath. She was scarlet and panting; her hair was coming down, because her hat had been torn from her head by brambles on the other side of the hedge; and she couldn't put it up again, as one of her small white shoes was left behind in the bog, and it was perilous work balancing on one foot. So she stood still, and gazed in wrath and fury at the two spotted cows on the other side of the barrier. Mark gave way to helpless mirth.

"Mark, if you don't stop, I shall hate you! There's nothing funny about it at all. Those cows were perfectly raging, and they nearly killed us. I've never had such a horrible sensation—never!"

Mark controlled himself by a violent effort. "Oh, Priscilla, I'm sorry! Look,

I'm not laughing at all: I'm not even smiling! Were you really frightened?"

"I was simply paralyzed with terror," replied Priscilla impressively. "And, whatever you say, Mark, you look exactly as though you wanted to laugh and it hurt dreadfully not to. It's worse than laughing. And I'm tired of standing on one foot, and I want my shoe and my hat right away."

"I fly!" cried Mark. "Only don't be surprised if I fling them in your face when I come back, as that chap De Lorges did with his lady's glove."

"No, don't!" wailed Priscilla frantically, and Mark, halfway over the hedge, looked back at her inquiringly. "Don't go, I mean! Oh, they're coming —come back, come back! I'm afraid!"

Mark descended in dignified silence. Priscilla was still jumping up and down on one foot and wringing her hands in anguish.

"What are you afraid of?" he demanded severely. "They haven't any

horns, even. Their only weapon is a tail. Their only defects are curiosity and spots."

"They—they bite!" returned Priscilla defiantly.

Mark's sudden laughter woke the echoes. "Oh, Priscilla! Oh, Priscilla! You don't believe it? A mere piebald cow? Immortal gods! She says they bite!"

"Rupert told me," replied Priscilla coldly. "And he knows a great deal more about cows than you do, Mark. You can't go back, anyway. And I'm awfully tired, and my hair's coming down, and it's all your fault, and I don't know what to do."

"You might put your foot down," suggested Mark, and he laughed again. "It would simplify matters, and it won't hurt you a bit. Oh, Priscilla!"

Priscilla put her foot down so emphatically that it suspiciously resembled a stamp. "I'm tired of your laughing in that ridiculous way," she said trem-

ulously. "I'm tired of your laughing at me, anyway. You always laugh—you——"

Mark was on his knees beside her in a minute. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" he begged. "I thought you were just playing—but I'm so stupid! You know how stupid I am. You aren't angry, are you?"

"I don't know," replied Priscilla sedately, and tried to pull away her hand. Nothing in the world is quite so sedate as a young woman who knows that she is in the wrong.

"Oh, you mustn't be, even in play: not even to pretend. It hurts me so! You don't know! But you're my playmate. You're the only one who understands in all the world, and when you're angry——"

"The only one?" asked Priscilla softly, and her hands were still.

Mark knelt for a moment in his silence, his head bowed over the little, fragile, passive hands. Then he let them fall and rose slowly to his feet. "No,"

he said simply. "I—I had forgotten." He drew a long breath—he had nearly forgotten, indeed—Jacqueline, Cæsar, and the secret, and the important question! He had nearly forgotten honor!

Priscilla gave a little hard laugh. "You have a bad memory," she remarked, and she twisted the great rope of hair with unsteady hands.

But Mark smiled back at her invincibly. "Ah, don't be angry, Playmate! Look, let's start again—let's pretend. Real things hurt—it's so much better to make believe! You are the King's daughter, and the two dragons on the other side of the mountains have captured your golden crown and your jeweled sandal. Who shall I be?"

"The Fairy Prince," replied Priscilla, and her eyes begged, "Please! Please!"

But Mark was looking at something beyond her eyes. "Where's your imagination?" he asked. "No, I'll be just a passerby."

And Priscilla said nothing.

"What shall the passerby have for reward?" asked Mark.

"Didn't he generally have the Princess's heart and hand?"

"Not the passerby," denied Mark, and he smiled still, though his face was a little white. "He shall have the rose from the King's daughter's crown."

"He is an unthrifty passerby," replied Priscilla clearly, "to throw away the rose of the world for one of silk and tinsel."

Mark turned away his face so that she could not see it. "You're not playing fair, Playmate," he said. "You hurt. You know that I take what I may take in honor, give what I may give. Even in play we shouldn't forget that. Play fair, my playmate!"

Priscilla lifted her hands to her eyes, as though to brush away something ugly. "Is it honor, Mark?"

"You know, Playmate."

"Is it—because of—Jacqueline—that day at the picnic?"

"Yes," said Mark. "I hadn't known till then."

"I knew," nodded Priscilla. "Ever since you've been different, you know. It couldn't help being a little different, of course, could it?"

"No," replied Mark gently. "It couldn't help it."

"But we're still playmates?" asked Priscilla. "Always, always, Mark? No matter what happens?"

"Always, always, dear my princess, dear my lady, dear my playmate!" said Mark, and his clear voice was that of a joyous child and a great warrior.

"Oh, if you'll only be happy!" cried Priscilla. "If you'll only stay happy, nothing else matters but that."

"You mustn't worry about me," Mark told her, "because I'm always happy. So you see it's quite all right."

Priscilla closed her eyes for a minute, with a little shiver. When she opened them again she nodded and smiled. "Yes," she said, "quite all right. Now

let's start again, Mark. Where were we? Oh, I remember. You were about either to climb or move mountains to get me back my crown. Would you mind if I fed the dragons grass or something during the operation, to distract their minds and relieve mine?"

"It's wretched etiquette," replied Mark; "but, as it's to relieve your mind and as they might bite my person, I courteously consent. Feed them from this side of the mountain, please."

"I shouldn't mind them so much if they hadn't spots," explained Priscilla feebly, as she proffered a tremulous handful of fragrant herbs to the two monsters. "Oh, hurry, hurry, Mark!"

"What's the matter?" he demanded. The jeweled sandal had been extracted from the bog, and he was wrestling valiantly with the golden crown.

"I—I—somehow I dropped the grass, and they're going after you—they're—oh, hurry!"

Mark glanced from the two spotted

cows, ambling leisurely toward him, to Priscilla's anguished face, gave the hat a final jerk, and cleared the hedge at a bound.

"It's all right," he assured her. "I'm perfectly intact. Here are the crown and the sandal, my princess."

"Thank you," said Priscilla in a very small voice. "I'm sorry that I screamed. But I hate cows—I do! I can't help it. Especially spotted ones."

"Then it was awfully brave of you to try to distract them. I never should have noticed them coming if you hadn't screamed; so I probably owe you my life. These are poor returns."

Priscilla put on the shoe and surveyed the damaged hat with a critical eye. "It's rather a battered crown," she laughed. "I hope that you will not consider me lacking in gratitude, good Sir Passerby, if I return it to the cows. They can make a feast of Lucullus off it."

"First my rose," exacted Mark.

Priscilla wrenched the silken trifle free from its swathings of tulle, brushed it with smiling lips, tossed the hat over the fence, and presented the flower to Mark with a low courtesy. "Poor guerdon for a gallant knight!" said she.

"My father had no better," said Mark; but he put it in his pocket without looking at it. "Now what, Playmate?"

"I don't think that we shall have any more exciting adventure than our pitched combat with the cows," meditated Priscilla. "I fervently pray not, at any rate! So suppose we sit down here for a little while, and get cool, and commune with Nature."

"Suppose we do," agreed Mark. "Except that I vote that we commune with each other instead of Nature—I have lots to talk about."

"Then talk," admonished Priscilla. "I haven't."

"That's always a perfect way to start an easy flow of conversation," laughed Mark. "It makes the other person just

long to open his soul. What a treasure you must be for a dinner partner, Priscilla!"

"I don't put it quite so candidly, then," she admitted. "It does slightly diminish the first fine careless rapture. Let's play a new game, Mark,—let's pretend that we're very grown up and serious; let's pretend to talk about real things."

"What a foolish game, Playmate," said Mark gently, "when all the nicest things to talk about aren't real!"

"Aren't life and death, and joy and sorrow, and love and hate real?" asked Priscilla.

"I don't know," answered Mark simply. "But sometimes I wonder."

"That's because you have never felt them," returned Priscilla, and her eyes were bitter.

"There are things that are so much more real," said Mark. "There are the stars, and the winds, and dawn on the hills, and laughter, and music, and

dreams! There's nothing in the world so real as dreams."

"But they end," cried Priscilla. "They end! Some day you'll wake up and find yourself all alone in a little gray room, with the doors of your heart and the windows of your soul locked fast—and you can't get out—you can't get out! You can scream yourself deaf, and beat at the closed windows, and batter at the bolted doors; but you'll be locked in fast—there's no way out!"

"Oh, yes," said Mark. "There's always the key to the fields."

"The key to the fields?" asked Priscilla.

"It's to a little door behind a curtain," explained Mark. "Just a turn in the lock, a step in the darkness—and you're free!"

"No," replied Priscilla, "there's no way out—no way at all! It's because you don't know that you think there is, Mark! No more dreams: nothing but the little gray room! And all because

you liked dreaming better than living! If you had stayed awake, they could not have locked you in, and you could have swept and garnished the little room, and made it fine and bright. And air would have come in through the open windows, and comrades through the open doors, if you had not dreamed."

"I take my dreams," defied Mark gayly. "And sometimes dreams come true, Playmate."

"Do they?" asked Priscilla.

"I think that they always come true," said Mark.

"Oh, you blind, blind, happy little boy!" cried Priscilla, with a catch in her breath. "You mustn't think that: it would be so terrible when you woke up! Look around you! Can't you see the sin and misery and hypocrisy and vileness on every hand? Look down! Can't you see that at your feet is dirt instead of flowers?"

"But the flowers come from the dirt," said Mark. "And I don't see the sin

and the misery and the vileness. I just see strange folk who speak an alien tongue. And sometimes I am lonely, because I can't understand them, and they can't understand me." In his dark eyes Priscilla saw again the curious remoteness that she had wondered at on that first day. "I am so lonely sometimes," he said, "for countries I have never known, for comrades I have never greeted, for loves that I have never had! Or did I know and love them once? I think that I shall love and know them again, and speak their tongue and clasp their hands."

"Do you mean in Heaven?" asked Priscilla.

Mark's eyes widened suddenly, and then he smiled. "Do I?" he wondered. "Over the edge of the world, anyway."

"I want to be happy now; I don't want to wait till Heaven!" protested Priscilla passionately. "This is my world, and I love it. In the golden streets I would long for the green lanes,

and by the rivers of milk and honey I would miss the little brown brooks. In all that blinding white light I would miss starlight and sunlight and firelight. At the pearly gates I would sigh for the hawthorn hedges. Do the angels always sing—have they forgotten how to laugh and cry? Ah, I would remember! I would lean out over the edge of Heaven, and watch the little, dear, foolish world spinning far below—and I would ache to think that I had lost it, even though I had gained Heaven itself!"

Mark laughed joyously. "It would have been a bad exchange," he cried. "Alack, alack! what a sorry Paradise! Mine is all full of birds and children and stars and flowers and laughter—all my playmates of eternity."

"You would not miss me there," said Priscilla.

"No," said Mark, "because I should have you. *Vive l'Éternité!*"

"What if there isn't any?" asked Priscilla slowly. "What if when you

step off the edge of the world there's nothing there but a black hole?"

"Ah, how horrible!" cried Mark sharply. "Don't!"

"What are we talking about?" asked Priscilla. "Oh, I remember—we were playing at being serious. I'm tired of playing that: let's be silly."

"I defy you to be any sillier than we have been!" laughed Mark. "Good Heavens, what nonsense we have been talking! Think of bothering about Heaven or Hell or Eternity itself on a day like this! It's so glorious to be alive and here and you and me—what does all the rest matter? I'm going to shout!"

Which he did, and Priscilla shouted too. Then they looked at each other and gave way to hilarious mirth.

"I do love you when you're silly!" cried Mark. "You're so beautifully silly! Oh, how splendid—how splendid it is to be you and I!"

Priscilla shivered suddenly. "I'm

cold," she said. "And I think I want to go home. I have a headache, and I'm tired."

"How hateful!" mourned Mark. "Why didn't you tell me, and I shouldn't have been so tiresome? Never mind: I ought to have known. How could I have screamed and laughed and talked that way when you were tired? Is it a bad headache? Can you walk? Do you want me to carry you?"

"It's nothing," denied Priscilla. "If I rest just a little it will be perfectly all right. Of course, I can walk. Talk all the time, please, and don't be ridiculous about having made a noise. I like noise."

"I like it when I make it," admitted Mark. "But sometimes I hate it. This is the path to the house."

"There are some of the adventure seekers getting berries," said Priscilla. "I see them through the trees. There is someone in a white dress with green—she has on a big green hat."

"It's Jacqueline," said Mark.

"Of course," replied Priscilla quickly. "Now I see her hair. How bright it is! And the man is Arthur Gordon."

"If you walk so fast you will tire yourself," reproved Mark. "And we're almost there, anyway. I see the gate."

"Let's go round by the rose garden. My hair is in a most horrible state, and Elizabeth would have hysterics if she saw my shoes. So we'll spare her."

"Poor Priscilla, you look as if you had had as many adventures as Ulysses!" laughed Mark. "Oh, look out—there goes your dress again!"

"I don't care," she declared recklessly. "It's because there are so many roses. Wait, I'll give you some real ones for that tawdry reward."

"No," said Mark. "They die. I hate dead roses."

"I had forgotten," said Priscilla softly. "It has been a beautiful day, Mark. I loved it all, even the spotted cows."

"But there haven't been any adven-

tures. Aren't you coming back, Playmate?"

"I don't know. Do you want me?"

"I——" began Mark.

"All hail, good folk!" came a strident voice from the end of the garden. "What are you doing in this unadventurous spot? I saw you headed this way; but my attention was somewhat distracted, as at that precise instant Jacqueline turned her foot. We limped home together, and I am now all, all alone. Is anything wrong with you?"

"Nothing except complete nervous exhaustion," replied Priscilla. "I am a shattered wreck, my good friend, and a broken spirit. I have been pursued by the beasts of the field. And I am now going to retreat to a less harrowing atmosphere."

"Aren't you coming back?" asked Mark.

"I'll send word. No, don't bother to come too."

"I will bother," retorted Arthur

irately, "because I have to go that way to get to my saddlehorse that is going to bear me swiftly over hill and dale. But if my company is obnoxious to you, I'll follow at ten paces."

"You *are* insane," smiled Priscilla. "Good-by, Mark, in case I don't see you again."

"Good-by till tea, in that unhappy event," smiled Mark.

"I feel singularly inopportune," murmured Arthur unhappily. "Roses—partings—who am I to hover near at hand? I withdraw."

"So do I," laughed Priscilla. "Never mind the door: the window is open, and we can go through that. Good-by, Mark."

"Good-by, Playmate!" he called back happily. He waited for a minute until the little figure had vanished through the open window, until the voices had died away. Then he took out the crushed silken rose.

"My dear!" whispered Mark. "Oh,

my dear!" And he kissed it deep in its heart.

Something cracked behind him, and he swung sharply on his heel. Jacqueline Campbell sprang back with a little cry, hiding her hands behind her. But Mark had seen the sudden gleam of steel in the warm sunshine.

XIII

THE LADY IN GREEN SHOWS MUCH TALENT

"OH!" cried Jacqueline. "How you startled me! I—I didn't know that anyone was here." Mark put away the rose and came toward her. "Gordon said that you had hurt your foot," he said gently. "Is it very bad?"

"Not very," replied Jacqueline faintly. She was still fighting for breath, with her hands hidden behind her. "I—just turned it a little. I remember now. Arthur said that he saw you, when we were gathering the berries. Where is Priscilla?"

"She was tired; so we came home. She is resting indoors now, I think."

"Is she coming back?"

"I don't know. But you are so white! Is it that wretched foot? You oughtn't to stand on it, you know. If

you will put your hand on my shoulder, I'll help you back to the house."

"No," replied Jacqueline. "No. It hardly hurts at all. There is Priscilla's maid, coming from the house."

"Mees Hampden says, Sir, zat she is still a leetle tired, so she will rest till ze tea. An' zat you're not to worry about her, but to go out again if you weesh to."

"Thank you," said Mark to the trim, small person. "Will you tell her that I'm so awfully sorry? But I'll see her at tea; so I won't worry."

When the trim, small person had gone, he turned back to Jacqueline. "I know it isn't the foot," he said. "But what is it? Can't you tell me? I thought that we were friends."

"You would despise me!" whispered Jacqueline, so low that he bent to catch the words.

Mark shook his head. "Oh, no! I couldn't, you know. Because when I needed a friend most you were my friend,

and because a man must be most despicable to despise a woman."

"As I despise myself!" whispered Jacqueline.

"Oh, but you mustn't! You are so beautiful and so kind! Won't you tell me?"

Jacqueline flung out her hands to him with a gesture at once violent and constrained. "There!" she cried. "Let that tell you, you who were my friend."

Mark stared curiously at the little glittering revolver in her hands—it looked almost like a toy, shining and sparkling in the sun. Then he touched her arm very gently. "Is it as bad as that?" he asked.

Jacqueline's face contorted suddenly. "Oh, it's worse!" she cried. "A thousand times—a thousand times worse! Or why should I be using that?"

"Then tell me," said Mark. "Let me help—tell me."

"I can't!" stammered Jacqueline fearfully. "Oh, never—never! How

could you help—what could you do? There is nothing left but this—you mustn't stop me—you mustn't, you mustn't!"

"Tell me," repeated Mark.

"Cæsar—I—we—oh, no!" She covered her face with her hands, choking back the terrible, strangling sobs. "Oh, no, I can't—I can't! Don't make me! You are killing me!"

"Give me that thing!" said Mark. "There! Now you will tell me. What has Cæsar done?"

"Don't touch me!" shuddered Jacqueline. "I am vile. That is what Cæsar has done!"

"You mean—like Marguerite?" asked Mark softly.

For a minute Jacqueline's soul sickened within her, and a wild thought gripped her to drop this dreadful farce, to fling herself at Mark's feet, to tell him all the horrible truth, and beg him, implore him, force him, to forgive her and to lift her out of the mire of lies

and intrigue and vileness. And then her heart failed her. This once more they should serve her; then she would forswear them forever. For a moment her lips twisted in a dreadful smile, as she thought of the flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, credulous child to whom he had compared her; then she dropped her hands from her face.

"Like Marguerite!" she repeated. "Now you may go."

"Oh, poor Jacqueline!" cried Mark, and in his voice cried all the pity of the angels. "Poor Jacqueline!"

"Give me my pistol," said she steadily. "You see there is no other way."

"He will marry you," said Mark. "He is not cruel. We will go to him and ask him, and he will marry you."

"He!" cried Jacqueline bitterly. "He has done with me—he denies me! No, I am the victim of my blindness, my ignorance, my folly! How can I live now? The women would pull aside their skirts when I pass, the men would not

see me. I have fallen low—I will fall no lower! Give me the pistol, Mark. Death is not so kind to me as it was to Marguerite. It will not come to me—I must go to it. Marry me! Did Faust marry Marguerite? Which one of all the village churls sought her hand? No honest man can marry me—no dishonest man will! Give me the pistol!"

Mark drew a long breath, and put the revolver in his pocket. "I will marry you," he said.

XIV

AN UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION

"COME IN!" called Charteris.

The door opened slowly, and Mark stood framed in the opening, his golden head shining uncannily bright against the dark paneling of the hall.

"Oh, come in, Spencer. You are very decidedly welcome. Let's see, it's five minutes to four, isn't it? Will you wait just a minute till I sign these checks? If I stop now, the good moment will pass, and they will remain unsigned for all eternity. There's a chair."

"I came just because Jacqueline wanted me to let you know that she had told me everything," replied Mark. "So I won't come in, I think."

"Did she really?" inquired Charteris, gathering up the papers and putting them in a drawer. "Do you know, I didn't think that she would. She has

saved me an infinitely disagreeable task. Well, there are times when one must handle pitch, even at the risk of soiling one's hands. Mine aren't quite clean; but the work is done."

"That was all I wanted to say," said Mark gravely, and he turned to go.

Charteris looked at him keenly. "Did it hurt, Spencer?" he asked, and his voice was very kind. "Were many dreams broken, Lad? Was it an idol that fell, smashing its clay feet? Ah, well, it's an ugly sight to see a woman fall—even such a woman."

"An uglier sight to see the one who pushed her," said Mark.

Charteris shrugged his shoulders and his face looked tired. "So she has been working on your pity! And you despise me, I suppose?"

"I think I do," replied Mark.

"Ah, well! You are with the majority. But—I'd rather that you didn't despise me." He sat silent for a moment, fingering the pen uncertainly.

Then he raised his head. "I rarely defend myself,—it is an absurd and gratuitous performance,—but oddly enough, I—I crave your good opinion. Jacqueline is the most dangerous woman in London. You were what is referred to in musical comedies as the catch of the season. When one walks with one's eyes on the stars, one does not see the tigress lurking in the ambush. But my eyes were not on the stars, and I knew the tigress of old. If I have had to tear you a little in wrenching you from her claws, if I have wounded her, it is because I had no choice. One cannot argue with a tigress. What I have done is my one good action in twenty years. You should not despise me for it. I did it for you—and for someone else."

"For me?" asked Mark.

"You will not look at the stars now," said Charteris; "but you will have time to see the flowers. That is better, I think; for we can touch the flowers, and the stars are very far away. There is a

flower at your feet that shines as white as any star." He rose suddenly and came toward Mark. "Did you not show Priscilla the great adventure to-day?"

A wave of scarlet flashed across Mark's face, and his eyes darkened. "I'd rather that you didn't talk about Priscilla," he said.

"Had you? Then after just this once I won't." He laid both hands on Mark's shoulders, searching his face with relentless eyes. "You made a strange mistake the other night, Lad. It is you who should have asked Priscilla the important question, not I."

Mark made no sound or motion; but every trace of color ebbed slowly from his face, and his eyes widened.

Charteris dropped his hands; his search was ended. "Go and tell her now," he said gently. Then he gave a curt little laugh. "So Jacqueline omitted to clear up the mystery of the question in her general confession! Ah, well, I am not greatly surprised. I am more

surprised that what truth she told did not shrivel on her lips."

"Whatever she may be, whatever she has done, you have no right to speak ill of her," said Mark, and his voice sounded very far away.

Charteris raised his eyebrows. "Why?" he demanded briefly.

"Because you have dragged her down to what she is."

"My dear boy," said Charteris, "I am rather tired of these picturesque metaphors. They are the work of Jacqueline's fertile imagination; but I do not care for them from your lips. Exactly how have I dragged Jacqueline down?"

"You have betrayed and deserted her," said Mark. "Is not that enough?"

"I?" cried Charteris, and the incredulous amazement rang true in his voice. "I? You are mad!"

"You mean that—you didn't?" asked Mark carefully.

"Ah, that—baggage!" cried Char-

teris between his teeth. "I have stooped low in my time; but not so low. We are talking at cross purposes, you and I, Spencer. Exactly what was it that Jacqueline told you?"

"She said——" began Mark, and then stopped, clutching Charteris's arm. "You're sure that this is all real; that we're not asleep, you and I?"

"I am very sure," replied Charteris. "I wonder that we have slept so long."

"Yes," said Mark, "that's it—it's because I'm awake that it all seems so strange. What was I telling you? About Jacqueline. She said that you had betrayed and disgraced and forsaken her; like Marguerite, you know. And that you wouldn't marry her; so no one else would. And she had a little pistol, and she had come out into the rose garden to kill herself."

"Good God! what a creature!" cried Charteris. "And I warrant that it wasn't even loaded!"

"Oh, yes, it was," said Mark. "Because she gave it to me afterward, to show that she wouldn't do it again."

"She was always careful of her stage properties," replied Charteris. "But what huge risks she was taking. She must have known that, for all her precautions, it was merely a matter of time before you found out. As chance has it, it was merely a matter of minutes."

"Are you sure that she isn't—good?" asked Mark. He was shaking at the doors and windows, though he knew that they were fast locked.

"Good!" cried Charteris. He flung open the desk drawer, scattering the papers recklessly. "Here are Louis Dethero's letters, and one from young Gilleon. Here are some of the documents in the Duncairne divorce case. Here—ah, here's her own warrant! It explains things with a candor and simplicity that the others lack. Here, take it; it's addressed to you. Thank Heaven that I'm not too late—that I didn't let

all her trickeries blind me! Well, do you see now?"

Mark handed the bit of white paper back to him with a strange little smile. "Yes, now I see," he said gently. "But I'm afraid that it is a little too late. You see, I married her this afternoon."

"My God!" cried Charteris loudly. His hand had closed on the bit of paper like a vise, and he stood there, tense and rigid, as though in the grip of some mortal paralysis.

"You mustn't mind so much," said Mark, and he touched his arm gently, "because you couldn't help it, you know."

At the touch of his hand, Charteris shuddered strongly. Then he groped his way to the chair before the desk, and caught at it, stumbling. "What have I done?" he whispered. "What have I done?"

"But you haven't done anything. You don't understand. It is I who have

always done such foolish, blind things, because—because I have always been asleep, I think. Everybody knows. They just laugh, and say, 'Oh, Mark!' Nobody minds, and you mustn't. This is just the most foolish and the most blind, you see. It's all my fault."

"Mine!" said Charteris, his head prone on his arms that lay across the desk. "Mine!"

"Oh, don't!" cried Mark pitifully. "Please don't!"

"My folly, my pride, my cursed desire to play with souls!" cried Charteris from the depths. "I thought that I had suffered enough, that God had done His worst, that I would show Him how much better I could manipulate these puppets! I had all the threads in my hand, and now they are broken—broken!"

"But they would have been broken, anyway," said Mark. "What did it matter whose hand held them? And in the end, you know, it will be all right."

"You mean that there's a way out?"

demanded Charteris, lifting a face haggard and worn as though by many fevered days and sleepless nights: only, in those brilliant eyes hope warred with despair. "You're right. It can't be legal: it was so lightning quick. A knot can't be tied fast in such a flash of time. You motored to London, I suppose? Oh, couldn't you see the trap when she urged such haste?"

"She said that I did not mean it," replied Mark, "and that she would kill herself; so I went."

"But you said—you said that in the end it would be all right," entreated Charteris. "You mean that there is a way out?"

"A way out," nodded Mark. "And—no matter how dreadful things may seem at first, I know—oh, I'm sure—that it's all just a mistake! Do you remember that I said once that I wasn't sure who was wrong, everybody else or myself?" He laughed joyously. "It was I, of course. It's as though an

Italian went to Russia, and was hurt because everybody else didn't speak Italian; and so he couldn't understand them and they couldn't understand him. What do you think that he ought to do?"

"Learn Russian," said Charteris, and he smiled faintly.

"But if he couldn't? If he had tried, and it was too hard, or he was too stupid?"

"He might go back to his own country," said Charteris.

"Of course!" triumphed Mark. "It's so simple—I knew that you would think so too!"

"Are you going back to Australia?" asked Charteris. "We shall miss you, here in England."

Mark shook his bright head. "You won't even remember to forget me," he laughed. "You will say, 'He wasn't here—he wasn't real—he has not gone!' Some of you who have been good to me will sigh and say, 'Poor Mark!' and the others will laugh and say, 'Poor Mark'

—and you will all shrug your shoulders and forget to remember."

Charteris looked at the radiant figure poised in the doorway, the shining, golden head, the shining, dark eyes, the beautiful, vivid, shining, young face, and the tears suddenly burnt his eyes, while a longing to touch him, to keep him, to hold him fast, shook him violently from head to foot.

"Ah, Mark!" he cried strongly, stretching out both hands to the light figure. He felt his hands caught and held, then released; but when the mist that blinded him had cleared Mark had gone. There was only the warm pressure of those strong, light, young hands on his to show that he had been there.

XV

THE CURTAIN FALLS

"I'm making the tea for Lisa," said Isabel, "because she's drinking lemon squash on the balcony and finishing 'The Vicomte de Bragelonne' to Rupert. How many lumps, Jack?"

"Two," said Jacqueline. "What kind of adventures did you and Mr. Allingham have?"

"Misadventures," replied Isabel. "We got lost three times, and the third time I was so tired that I cried. So, Mr. Allingham made violent love to me, and then I laughed."

"So did I," retorted Allingham. "I laughed first. Oh, and I got stung by a bee, and I swore!"

"And one of our hard-boiled eggs was a soft-boiled egg," shuddered Isabel. "If there is anything in the world more truly appalling than a cold soft-boiled egg, I trust I may never encounter it.

Oh, it has been a ghastly, ghastly day! What happened to you, Jacqueline?"

"I turned my ankle; so Arthur deserted me," replied Jacqueline lightly. She spoke a little more rapidly than usual, and her eyes were curiously bright. "So Mark took pity on me and bore me off in a motor, as his partner in adventure had deserted him too."

"Are you rested now from your perilous adventures?" asked Arthur Gordon, and his voice was extraordinarily kind as he looked at the small white figure in the deep chair.

Priscilla nodded and smiled. "Oh, yes, quite. It was only cows, you know; but they were utterly depraved and spotted, and the hedge was horribly high. It was quite the most exhausting and ignominious performance that I have ever undergone!"

"Then has everybody reported?" asked Isabel, and a gleam of amusement dawned in her eyes as they fell on the absorbed chess players in the corner.

"Did you and Captain Denby enjoy yourselves, Miss Kent?"

"Oh, yes," stammered Cynthia, a deeper pink in her pink cheeks. "It—it was very pleasant. The woods were very pretty, and Geor—Captain Denby found a dear little bird that had hurt its wings, and I brought it home."

"Ha!" remarked Captain Denby forcibly, and he tugged at his mustache with unconcealed complacency. "Very pleasant indeed! Ve-ry pleasant!"

"Here's Cæsar," announced Isabel. "He hasn't recounted his adventures yet. Good Heavens! they must have been exciting ones! You look as if you had been through the wars, *mon ami.*"

"I've had bad news," said Charteris briefly. "Yes, thanks, I'll have some tea; nothing in it, and rather strong."

"Hard luck!" said Arthur Gordon, through the general murmur of sympathy. "Anything that we can do?"

"I'm afraid not. Well, has it been a profitable day? Is everyone here?"

"It has been a beastly day," remarked Isabel emphatically, "and everyone is here but Mark. I wish that he would come—he is too fascinating, your Mark!"

Jacqueline stirred her tea serenely, watching Charteris through her lashes. Did he know?

"And he has been the most tremendous success this season," continued Isabel. "It has become the rage to pretend to say just what you think. If anyone asks you to dinner, if you want to be really chic, you just send a line saying, 'How sweet of you, but I really don't think that I shall! Something better might turn up.' And the young men say to the dashing matrons, 'When you smile like that, I have the most extraordinary sensation: I have an almost irresistible desire to embrace you.' And the little débutantes say to the eligible bachelors, 'There is something about you that attracts me strangely: I feel that we are to know each other better.' I

have had seventeen men tell me that I had a subtle but irresistible charm, and thirty-nine women tell me that ugliness is far more fatal than beauty. Candor is quite *de rigueur.*"

"There's an awfully romantic story about his father and mother, isn't there?" asked Binkie, who had forgotten to be artistic, and whose face was lighted by eager curiosity.

"Madly romantic," assented Isabel, and she glanced over her shoulder at Cynthia, and then continued, lowering her voice dramatically, "Gordon Spencer was the most brilliant statesman in England, they say, and absurdly young for all his honors. At the very height of his career he suddenly disappeared with little Felicity Rassendyl, whom old Rassendyl, it seems, was leading a dog's life. They say that London went simply delirious with virtuous excitement. As for the delinquents, it was discovered that they were leading a truly Arcadian life in Australia, and on Rassendyl's

death were married with commendable promptness."

"Did it last?" demanded the boy eagerly.

"Good Heavens, yes!" nodded Isabel. "It was really a grand passion, you know. When Felicity died, twenty years later, Gordon Spencer shot himself through the heart."

There was a tiny crash, and Jacqueline bent low to pick up the shattered bits of porcelain. "How unspeakably clumsy!" she said. "You were saying —that he shot himself?"

"Yes. They're a race of idealists: all a little mad, like most idealists. They say that young Spencer's great-grandfather wound up in a madhouse."

"Are all idealists mad?" asked the poet.

"It's a matter of opinion," replied Charteris. "They are dubbed dreamers and madmen, saints and fools, failures and pioneers; but they form a gallant enough band, these same idealists. There

is a golden-bearded King from Camelot and a little peasant maid from Domrémy, a certain quaint Spanish gentleman and a gaunt American, a red-headed citizen from Athens and a gentle soul from Assisi, a tired-eyed philosopher from Greece, and a carpenter's Son from Nazareth. It's not a bad title, idealist!"

"And they all died dogs' deaths!" cried the poet. "Lord! what a world—what a world!"

"By the way, where *is* Mark?" asked Charteris quietly.

"I saw him just now through the window," replied Cynthia happily. "It's my move. He was going toward the rose garden."

"I think that I'll go after him," said Charteris, and he rose, putting down his cup.

Jacqueline sat staring after him, with dreadful, straining eyes. She could not breathe—she could not speak—she could not think—she could only listen! Outside on the balcony Lisa was singing a

little French song; that was Rupert laughing.

"Cæsar seemed in a hurry," said Isabel. "I wonder——" But the words died on her lips.

A shot rang out quite near—another shot—another.

Somewhere a door crashed to, and there was the beat of flying feet on the path beneath the windows. And then for a little space all was very still.

THE END

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